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The Marshall Literary Magazine



et cetera
The Marshall Literary Magazine

1984-85
Marshall University
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1984-85

et cetera

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a cetera, the Marshall University Literary Magazine, is an annual publication of student and alumni creative efforts in prose and poetry. I would like to thank my staff, the English Department faculty, especially Dr. Richard Spilman, Dr. John McKernan and Dr. John Teel, and Marshall students for their help in making this issue successful.

Joyce Porter Mott,
editor

Et Cetera

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Man is the only animal that laughs and weeps; for he is
the only animal that is struck by the difference between
what things are and what they might have been.

William Hazlitt

First Prize Poetry

Drinking at Dick's Place in Memphis

It's been raining now for days.
I remember when I was in Memphis
and I called this girl I'd met
to tell her I loved her. She had
an answering machine and I was
calling from Dick's place, you
know, the bar with the red awning,
and I didn't want to say I loved
her on the tape so I asked her
to call me back and left a
number. It was the wrong damn
number. So, I got another
beer and some quarters and tried
again and left another number.
But it wasn't the right number
either—in all I called five
times and left five separate
numbers. She never called back
or maybe she did. The rest of
the night's not so clear after
that. But I didn't want to
tell her how much I loved
her over the phone.

Tom Bailey

Second Prize Poetry

First Communion Poem

Virginal white dresses
on doll brides of seven,
Clean and white now
but worn for Easters
thereafter until dingy,
Chuggy red chapped thighs from
gray woolen day dresses,
Giggles and farts and
occasional solemnity
kneeling on unpadded kneelers
(hard on young knees).

Gray robed altar boys with
flushed faces from
stolen chapel wine,
mumbling through Latin responses
and dreaming of baseball and
hamburgers for Lent.

Boxes of
melt-in-your-mouth
wafers consumed,
"You're eating the baby Jesus!"
we snickered and peeked
through fingers.
White-eyed Saint Michael perched above
armed and ominous in plaster,
Threatening to slay us
(boy-girl-boy-girl
like a shish kebab!)

Processions of nuns
like black rocking statues
who were once
doll brides on kneelers
looking back
at black nuns,
giggling and farting
and only
occasionally solemn.

Lee Wood

First Prize Fiction

Sunrises

AMOS LOOKED INTO THE DARKNESS. down the flat delta road, down along his yellow lights. "What in hell?" Amos jammed the brakes hard, the car squealed, turning sideways in the road, stopping. The engine died. His breathing was loud, heavy-the windows fogging from the inside. Amos scrambled for the door handle, fighting his way out of the car. His face was wet, the air chilling his sweat. He stood outside the car, turning about, staring off into the fields beside the road. Highway 82. Amos wiped his face with the palms of both hands. The headlights of his car shone into misty darkness, lost before they touched on anything.

II

Amos woke into the blank ceiling. His fingers gripped the sheets. He saw sweating. Then he felt Ira's arm beside him, saw the digital time lighted next to the bed, 5:01, knew he was home. It had been over a month since he'd found himself driving along highway 82. The reality of finding himself somewhere without reason returned him there night after night. He felt that hollowness through him again.

Amos tried to relax, closed his eyes, concentrating on breathing evenly. He imagined himself as his father. Imagined himself like his father in those last years, his father's mind as blank as his stares, his father's body wasting into white skin like paper over his bones.

Amos sat up. The moon was shining onto the earthen brown afghan covering the brass bed Ira had gotten in Jackson. She lay asleep beside him, hugging her pillow. She never slept with her head on the pillow. He watched her in the soft light, listened for her steady breathing over his own. Her long hair spread over onto the sheets. Carol Lee's hair just like hers. And Ira's dark eyes too, always busy and calm. Their daughter's the same. A smile lay over Ira's lips. Amos leaned over and kissed her cheek and she reached out her hand. He took it in his own and sat beside her.

The faint moonlight flickered about the room, shadowing the limbs of the trees outside the window. Amos had wished his father dead. Had prayed for him to die, had held his hand as he lay buried under the stark sheets in the hospital and asked God to take his father away. He'd wanted to kill him himself. His father died, finally, after four years. Amos had hoped to remember him as a tall strong man, dark with the sun, thick and powerful like he had been as they'd hunted deer in the fall when he was still too young to shoot, his father's big fists wrapped around the wooden stock of his rifle, Amos trailing, imitating the step, holding his .410 pointed toward the ground as his father did - but his father came back to him starved and blank faced. The doctors said he had Alzheimer's disease.

Flipping back the covers, Amos swung his legs to the floor. He stood up and walked to the window. The moonlight glowed over him, the acres of his yard almost as light as a July evening. A mist clung to the pecans. His father had been stubborn; as stubborn and headstrong as his daughter was now. Amos smiled to himself. Once his father had chopped a field of cotton by himself to show a crew how it was supposed to be done, cutting in sharp with the hoe and digging out the roots of the Johnson grass, the tea weed, the cockleburs and the wild cotton. He'd made all fifty of them stand in that sun without helping and watch him until he was through hoeing out the last weed. Do it right or don't ever come back to work on this farm he'd told them.

When Carol Lee had left home at eighteen she'd announced that she was going to school in Memphis. He'd protested, argued, yelled; then he'd had to just watch her too. She'd supported herself working as a waitress and

had sent his checks back uncashed. He could still see her as a young girl her sun tanned face smiling in his rearview mirror from the truck bed behind him, gripping to the sides, loose hair whipping away backward in the wind, but when she'd come home she'd asked him for a job on the farm like he was her boss, not her father. Now, she handled all the finances. She'd switched his books to a new system. Her computer printout showed their profits had increased by twenty three percent. Amos could imagine his father squatting on his haunches in the dirt of the fields and Carol Lee standing beside him with her finger tapping her chin, both of them staring out into the fields.

Amos turned away from the window and walked to the chair where he'd laid out his clothes. He put on long underwear, pulled on his socks, wearing a heavy flannel shirt and grease stained khakis, lacing on his heavy boots.

Ira was still asleep when he let himself out. The cold tasted sharp and crisp on his tongue. The frozen moisture in the grass sparkled pricks of light from the moon. Amos walked down the gravel drive to the edge of the south held-flat, dark, low, it stretched away to massed clumps of naked gray trees on the horizon-the silences of winter, crunching of gravels under his boots, his breath frosting white. His father had walked him down this gravel road in the summer when he'd been a boy. They'd walked over the entire length of dirt roads that linked their 1,200 acres, not saying anything really, but both of them watching over the thick green of the cotton reaching out pink and yellow blooms into the steamy August heat, feeling the bald sun on their backs that puzzle-cracked the gumbo soil, walking past their wells, under the shade trees covering their land. The redwing blackbirds swung side to side through the thick air, settled lightly, bending the cotton's tops, jerked their heads about-chirp and whistle long, chirp and whistle long. It had been sunrise when they'd started out. Coming back it had been a cool gray and they'd heard the burping frogs from the bayou in the evening dark. His father had knelt down in the dirt of the south field, searching into his eyes. Amos had looked straight back, as if it were the most important thing in the world not to look away, tasting the hot dust, its bland dryness. A light wind rustled past their silence. His father had held his face between his calloused dirt-lined palms, pulled him in then, hugged him tight within the strength of his huge arms, wrapped him within his smell of gasoline and the earth and sweat, covering him up. Then they'd walked close together through the yard through the stars of fireflies and the smell of the magnolias and into the yellowness of the kitchen.

A sheen of blue was rising from the east. Amos stepped into the field, shoving his worn hands into his pockets, and walked into the turned dirt, clodded rough, uneven, hard with the cold. He walked until the pink of the sun tipped through the naked trees-the moon still sharp and clear in its half of the sky, both dominating what was theirs. Sunrises had been what he'd always expected. Always the rumble of his tractors, the good-humored talk of Jimmy and Frederick and DJ., all of his labor, their cussing, his cussing, the whine of the crop dusters in the rustle of the cotton leaves, the hummed rush of the irrigation water through the ten inch pipes, chugging by from one of the wells. Amos stopped and sat down cross-legged in the field. The sun was beginning to roll upwards now with the momentum of the new day, slowly burning away the mist, rubbing his land free. The blackness sliding away like a snake at the sun's entrance. Amos buried his hands into the soil feeling the pricks of broken stems, the dropped fiber wisps of cotton, small clods, small smooth stones, its coldness too. Grabbing up two handfuls he let the sandy top soil run back out of his lists as he ground it onto itself. He smoothed the piles back into the land.

III

The smell of bacon came into the yard. Amos followed it in from the field by the gravel road. He smiled to think of Ira up and cooking-always fixing or making something. Pretty Mary Ira Fletcher. Her father's name had been Ira and they'd always called her Ira. Just seventeen and her face so smooth, her dark hair down over her shoulders. He was there along the road to her house everyday. Those tight scratchy wool pants and the flowers. Daisies and black eyed susans. Ira's brown eyes had lighted up so-he'd thought she was laughing at him, but she'd fussed the flowers into a vase on her mantle, squeezing his hand and thanking him. Kissed him... Amos stopped. He blinked and stared at the pecans. Unsure of his path. Turning about slowly. It was like trying to touch something just around a corner.

"Amos!" He turned into the voice. His mouth open. In a robe at the door framed within its screen... "Amos. What are you doing? You've been standing there forever. Come on inside now, breakfast is on." ..Ira. The smell of bacon. There was Ira. Amos blinked his eyes and looked about him. The door slapped shut. He put his hand to his forehead, then rubbed his eyes. Breakfast was on. He headed for the kitchen.

The kitchen table was mapped out with jelly jars, a big plate of biscuits, and his eggs and bacon. Amos didn't bother to wash his hands and sat down, pushing the napkin into his lap. Ira poured coffee into his cup. He looked up at her. She was watching him. The egg fell from his fork. It slid about the plate as he chased it. He grabbed a biscuit, shoving the bite against it and then into his mouth.

"Amos, what..." Ira started to say as Carol Lee walked into the kitchen.

"Morning Honey," Amos said to Carol Lee.

"Morning Daddy." Carol Lee stood there and look at him then at Ira. "What's the matter?" She pulled her chair out and sat down to the glass of orange juice set at her place, resting her head on her arms crossed over the table and looking at him sideways. Amos broke into his other egg's yolk and then reached for another biscuit.

"We need to finish up the inventory today," Amos said glancing up at his daughter. She arched back sitting straight up and crossed her legs under the maroon robe. Her hair was loose and ruffled down over her shoulders. Picking up a fork she tapped it steadily on the blue placemat. "I'd like to get our order for seed out this afternoon. At least get down to Greenville and get some estimate from Sam."

"I'll finish it today. But I've spoken with Ed McMullen." Carol Lee rested both elbows on the table now tapping the fork lightly against her palm and watching him eat. "I think he can give us a better deal. You know we really could get a better deal."

Amos mopped up the last of his egg with the hall of biscuit. "We've been doing business with Sam for twenty years. You know that." Amos looked up from his plate, meeting her gaze.

"He can still be our friend, but Ed can give us a better price. We could save a couple of hundred dollars." Carol Lee said, her hands now still.

Amos pushed away from the table. "Well, I'm going down to the shop. We'll talk about it." Amos stood up and walked out of the kitchen. The door slapped shut behind him.

"Amos," he heard Ira say her voice following him. He turned to look back at her. She stepped out onto the stairs, drying her hands in her apron, "You sure you feel all right?"

He gave her a smile. "Never better," Amos said, signaling with a thumbs up. He turned back and walked to the truck, climbed in and started the engine. He could see Ira looking after him as he drove off down the long gravel driveway.

The barn, the farm's workshop, stood up against the sky. Its yellow metal doors unlocked with a hollow sound from within-the eighteen-foot high doors rode back on their tracks. Amos stepped into cold darkness, boots clapping against the slick oil-spotted concrete floor. He could make out the tall shadows of tractor tires clumped with mud, empty chemical boxes; a

plow lay long across the floor its metal-big teeth waiting to be repaired; tools lay scattered over work benches and around the walls, which were covered with blown on insulation like layered dust. He hit the switch and the room flashed into light. Amos saw the lights flash on, but felt a darkness stagger over him. He grabbed at the wall. He opened his eyes to a cool wetness covering his face, wiping at the pounding in his head. Light lingers brushed his cheek, long hair tickling his forehead, down sloped eyebrows concerned over him.

Ira? "Daddy, are you okay?" Amos tried to sit up, her hand pressed him down. His vision began to widen, to focus. It was Carol Lee looking down on him. He brushed her hand roughly away, feeling dizziness and nausea as he sat up. The pounding in his head. He touched over his right eye, his fingertips came away smeared. Amos tried to stand up, wobbled. She grabbed his arm.

"Don't goddamnit!" The words bounced into the hollow shop, lingering there in the silence that followed. "Please don't," Amos said, straightening himself. Carol Lee was looking at the floor, still sitting. Her eyes reached up for him like his child again, scared, her mouth set hard so she wouldn't cry. There was blood on her bare arms, on her jeans too. He stood a moment balancing himself. Then walked out through the big doors, out into the sunlight. He rested his hands against his hips and stood still in the shop's yard. Oil stains patched the cold tire-rutted ground. He felt Carol Lee behind him.

"I'm sorry," he said. She touched his shoulder warily, then hugged him from behind, resting her head against his back. She didn't say anything, just held on. Amos could see his father again. Could see his father's stares so full of nothing that he'd wanted to slap him awake, yell to bring rum back. Amos closed his eyes hard, gritted his teeth. He grabbed Carol Lee's hands and turned to face her. "What do you say we walk, huh?" He said. She nodded up to him, biting her lip. He squeezed her hands and held on to one as they walked out the gate and onto the first dirt road, which led into all of their fields.

JV

Amos sat in front of the T.V. watching the evening news after supper. Carol Lee had taken her numbers into Greenville to talk prices with Sam. She'd said she was going to talk to Ed again too. She'd be back anytime. The weather called for another clear night, a warming trend. Spring was just around the corner.

Ira, her hair loose, sat knitting an afghan. The needles clacking out yarn of deep brown, two strings converging into a blanket. Ira was still handsome, her eyes deep and brown, her cheeks high up from laughing. Ira looked up and smiled at his watching her. She'd given him that smile walking to the barn after they'd danced all night at the Sunflower Jamboree. He could still feel her smooth body lying under him on a blanket in the hay that night, the d, y smell of hay tickling his nose in the sweetness of her hair. It had been his first time and hers too, his mouth finding hers in the moonlight that spotted through the gapped walls. She'd said she loved him and they'd gone to the barn often after that night. She was still young in her ways, making him dance to the radio in the kitchen, surprising him with picnic lunches during the summer when he was out in the hot fields, disguising wine in plastic coffee cups with lids. Always catching his eyes with her own, he still thought of her in the red dress she'd danced in at the Jamboree.

"I love you." His voice surprised him. Ira looked up from her knitting, her eyebrows questioning, but laughing to him. She set aside her afghan and came to him, kneeling in front of his chair, holding his hands light. She leaned up and kissed him softly. "It's been a lot of years Ira," Amos said. "You've been good to me, better than good." He felt her press his hands, watched her run her eyes over his face. There was a catch in his throat.

"What's the matter Amos?" She frowned, her eyebrows bunching up like she was trying to remember something. He tried to meet her eyes. "You've

been walking around all day long in a daze. Carol Lee told me about this afternoon." She touched the bandage over his eyes. "Not just about the falling." Amos felt a light trembling run through his legs. He shifted his seat in the chair and glanced at Ira. "And now you tell me you love me for only about the second time since we've been together." She kissed him again. "You're forgetting things again aren't you? I made an appointment with Dr. Robinson for Monday morning." Amos looked at her sharp. He felt a hollowness bomb into his stomach, nervousness twisting within him. "He'll tell you what's wrong, Amos. Don't worry. I forget things myself. I've looked for days for my knitting needles. I've even lost afghans." Ira leaned back on her legs still holding his hands. She looked concerned, sad too. "I'm sure it's nothing. You've **always** been so strong." He held her gaze as a spasm rippled through his stomach down into his groin. Amos glanced up at the ceiling and imagined himself buried under hospital sheets. He couldn't feel his control. It was wet. He realized what it was and tried to stop, but couldn't. He saw Ira through the blur over his eyes; couldn't stop that either. Ira started to reach up to his face, but he grabbed her hands tight. He shoved her hands into his crotch. He could see her confusion. The sweet hot smell crawled up into the air. Her nose wrinkled. He followed her eyes down to the wet of his pants, sodded into a wide stain across his lap. When she looked up, he could feel his whole face shaking. She raised her hands to his cheeks, smoothing his tears **away** across his lips and chin. She kissed his lips, his eyes, his cheeks. He watched her try to smile. "I love you too, Amos."

V

Ira's steady breath touched his ear, the clicking of the lighted digital beside his bed. Amos could remember his twelfth birthday, lying awake like this, waiting for his present with the morning; his first gun, the gun his lather had promised to give him so that they could go hunting together. That oiled blue-black barrel of the .410, its insides clean and smooth as a mirror. The slow-lighted shadows moved over the ceiling as the moon rolled across the sky.

The note he'd written was folded in the pocket of his khakis. He'd never been as good as he'd wanted with words. Ira's face was relaxed into gentle lines. He touched her lightly with his fingertips, feeling her so close. Amos turned back to the ceiling, trying to see through the darkness, letting his eyes close.

Amos woke and rolled himself to the side of the bed, swinging his feet from under the covers onto the floor. He dressed silently, lacing his boots by familiar touch in the faint moonlight of the room. He bent over the bed and kissed Ira's cheek, lingering over her breath. He stood and quietly pulled the paper from his pocket and unfolded it on his pillow. He moved through the darkness and out of the room.

He walked through the blackness of his house, confident that everything was in its place. He came to the door of Carol Lee's room and eased it open. The moonlight streaked her bed from the opened slat blinds. Amos walked in, stepping softly in his boots, slopping over her in the room's moonwhiteness. He stood there for a long time. He wished he could save her from the pain, but this **way** was best. This way her memories of him would be strong ones. Amos touched a strand of her hair spread over the pillow. Then he turned and went out, easing the door closed behind him. The rest she'd have to learn on her own.

Amos walked into the den and pulled his .410 from the gun rack. The stock was scratch worn from belt buckles and jacket zippers, from long hours in his hands as a boy. The shotgun felt tiny now in the width of his palms. He opened the drawer of a gun cabinet and shifted through it for a thin shell. Once outside, Amos slung the gun under his arm and crunched his **way** down the drive. All of his mornings led like this gravel path right back to his boyhood. The hundred year old pecans over him, waving their bark knarled arms, the smell of cold dryness- clean and light. The stars were up, pointing out of the sky toward him. The big moon was bright, splotch-featured. The fields were hazy dark, a layered fog rising above the stark soil. He stepped into his land. He felt sharp, the mist leasing his pores up, his eyes catching the blinking red wingtips of a high plane, his ears crisp

with the sound of his own footfalls crushing the frozen earth. The ground's solidity reassured him as he walked across it, farther and farther into the turned earth, until he stood in the center of the wide clearing of his land. He cradled the shotgun in his arms, and searched the oaks and pecans on his horizon, reaching himself into every corner of this held. The moon eased back, yawned across the sky. The pink sky born into a day that held itself up for his inspection. The soil seemed to reach up toward the light. It smelled musky and alive as it warmed and freed itself of the frost, ready for spring and the plowing. A redwing blackbird sounded, then more birds sang into the silence. Amos turned in his spot, his breath even, misting family in the dawn. The first time he'd fired this gun had been on Olson's bridge at sunrise: firing out across the Sunflower river, his gun's roar shattering the solitude as the blackbird's red sharp wings pitched forward, sending him lightly onto the river; his lather's big hand gripping strong and firm on his shoulder.

Tom Bailey

The blonde guitar

The guitar
in Bob's Pawn Shop
is burnished
blonde by the
overhead lights.
A Gibson,
six silver keys
and the six strings
finger-rubbed
bronze-
thumb
against the
touch
of my thumb.

I could learn
its song.
I could finger
the neck and
create some new
tune I
haven't heard.

But
in a moment
the bells
above the door
have jangled me
back out onto the
sidewalk,
into my one life,
into the blare of
car horns.

Tom Bailey

Rising

"If you would learn how to cook," my grandmother tells me, "you wouldn't be so impatient."

"I know how to cook," I tell her, drumming my fingers against the tabletop. The clock above the stove says ten till ten. I look out the window and see my husband standing on the edge of the vacant field next to our house. He wants to burn the brush to plant a garden, but this morning I have asked him to leave. "What's all this?"

I wave my hand over the breakfast table but it is a meaningless gesture. Scattered before me are crusts from pop-tarts and half-eaten bowls of Cheerios.

"I don't mean that stuff you get out of boxes," Grandma replies, "I mean food."

"That's what I meant too. Food. I cook. Aren't I? Isn't Tom?"

"Someone as skinny as you are ought to be shot for saying they're fat," she says, taking a sip of her decaffeinated. "You and Tom are skinny as rails. Both of you. I've never seen two people harder on themselves. You should bake bread. Make custard."

"Grandma, I'm a size ten and that's not that small. I know how you old people are. You think women are supposed to have hips and breasts but that's not how it is anymore."

"Oh, good heavens, Lou, some things never change." She forgets herself and lets out a snort; this is too ridiculous. "And I'm not old," she adds.

My grandmother and I stare at each other in the sunlit kitchen. The floors and walls are shades of yellow and this morning everything is brighter than I want it to be. I fiddle with the pineapple salt and pepper shakers I made at ceramics. My grandmother blinks behind her glasses. She eats breakfast with me, with me and Tom when he's home, every morning at nine since her stroke last fall. I pour out a little salt and shape it into a mound. She is an unpredictable old lady, this woman who raised me, and sometimes she can see farther than I want her to. I jump up and begin to clear the table. If she wants to think I'm impatient, I'll let her. Actually, I'm nervous. Tom and I were up arguing past dawn.

"I'm going to call my sister Helen and get her recipe for Dilly bread. It's the best stuff you've ever tasted." Grandma pushes back her chair and rises, one hand holding the edge of the table, the other grasping her walker. She is short and squat and heavy and I know I will look just like her when I 'grow up'. "I have to go," she says, "I didn't come here to stay."

I follow her through the house, walk past her, push open the screen and take deep breaths of country air. She's right. I am impatient. Not even noon and already I wish it were evening, Monday morning and I wish the week were gone. I am wishing my life away because I want a new one-one I could start having right now.

Grandma takes the steps slowly, her rubber pronged walker going out in front. Her body trembles as she leans against it. Her house, what we call the homeplace, sits fifty yards in front and to the left of us. She will make it. There is a lot of light in her, gumption, but in the hospital she was afraid. I squeezed her hand, the one without feeling, and talked her fear away. I told her she was proud of my life and I didn't give up easy. I told her to forget about Heartland Home for the Aged and what that smarmy doctor said. He kept wanting to consult with my husband. "Consult with me," I said. Tom was in Tulsa welding pipes when it happened. I was at Miller Elementary teaching school. It was the third week in September. I told the principal to get a replacement. That I needed a year off to take care of my grandmother and I might have a baby too. He was nice about it. Miss Turley,

fresh from college, came in October. My students gave me a party with balloons and Neapolitan ice cream. I took some strawberry and vanilla home to Grandma and it dribbled down her chin as I led her, but I just kept spooning and after a while she smiled at me. The next week I got her rubber balls to squeeze and a month later a walker. Tom called me every day. He wanted to know about Grandma, he said he didn't care if I had quit teaching, and when I told him I wanted a baby, he said he was tired of being away. He wanted our lives to change. "But I never want to lose you," he said, and his voice was so full of want and longing I thought, you've been in a bar, but that's not what I said. "Silly Tom," I murmured, "We've been together six years. Where would I go now?"

"Just listen, Louanne, this is no way to live. We're apart all the time. A man should be home with his family. I'm going to get out of this line of work. I'm going to teach school. too, use my degree."

"Suit yourself," I said. It was good news but I didn't want to press it. I knew Tom liked to be out in the open air with his ideas. When he told me he didn't think he could spend the rest of his life talking political science, I wasn't blown away. I knew he liked to roam as much as I liked the freedom of my four walls. When we got married, it was understood I wouldn't travel, for only when things are the same do I see new horizons: I take in situations slowly as well; that's why when the woman called from Tulsa, I reeled in the bedroom. My world, looking different, seemed to be falling apart.

"You want to talk to Tom?" I asked blinking. Roused from sleep, I took the call on the upstairs extension and fell back on the bed. "What do you want with him?"

There was a breathy silence. "Let me see if I got this straight," she said. "Is this Tom Harbour's house, the welder? He has two tattoos, one on his back, and drives a green Chevy van?"

My heart was pounding. I had this awful feeling. "Yes," I said carefully. "This is where he lives."

"I'd like to speak to him."

"I'm sorry. He's in Tulsa." I looked at the clock. It was 12:22.

"Honey," she said flatly, "I'm in Tulsa. He told me he was going home and I want to talk to him."

"He isn't here yet," I lied bravely and groped on the nightstand for the paper and pen. My hands were shaking but my voice was firm. "If you'll leave your name and number I'll have him call you when he gets in."

"He knows my number."

"What's your name?"

"Marie."

It was 12:22 when I called Tulsa. Tom picked up the receiver on thesecond ring.

"Look, Louanne," he said, after I had been embarrassingly hysterical. I had planned on being sarcastic and calm, but the minute I heard his voice, my resolutions fled. "I don't know what you're talking about. Why are you calling me, waking me up in the middle of the night?"

Now that was a lie, it was 10:30 in Tulsa. I stopped crying. He had made me mad.

"Don't pull that on me, Tom, you weren't sleeping."

"Okay, okay, but I have to go to work in the morning and I don't know who you're talking about."

"She seemed to know you quite well."

"Who are you going to believe? Some nut who calls you up with stories about me or -"

"If you don't tell me the truth, I'm going to call her. I've got her number," I lied.

"Look, if you believe anything Marie Watson tells you, you're crazy. She's an habitual liar, it's a pack of lies."

"Tell me," I threatened.

"Okay, but you've got to promise . . ." He hesitated so long I thought the line had gone dead. "It **was** oral sex and it happened a long time ago. Look, she's just a girl I met in a bar. She came up to me and started talking, she was . . . I had been drinking. It was all on her part. I didn't touch her, I swear."

"Tom, how dumb do you think I am?" I was shouting. "She knows about the tattoo!"

"That bitch! What did she tell you? I ought to kill her . . . calling my wife . . ."

I hung up when he started apologizing. I sat on the edge of the bed, weak at the knees. The phone rang and kept on ringing. I took it off the hook and went outside to swing.

I sat in the porch swing till morning. The chains groaned as if they would snap. I thought of all the weekends he had come home, how I had run to meet him, and how it had all been a lie. I was glad I didn't have a baby and then, perversely, wanted one so I could love it instead. Streaks of pink appeared on the horizon and I began to rationalize. If he's telling the truth, I thought, it isn't so terrible. After all, he's a man, out on the road, lonely, it that's all that happened, well, I could live with it. Better find out for sure, a voice inside me said.

Marie Watson. Funny, but I didn't expect her to be listed. I suppose she didn't seem real. But there she was, right in the Tulsa phonebook. The operator, a young male, rattled off her number. "Ma'am," he asked me, "Did you get that? Are you there?"

I waited till 10:30 to call her. It was 8:30 there but I didn't care. Marie was grumpy; she was a cocktail waitress working shifts. I told her my name but she didn't recognize me, so I forgot about introductions and said, "Tom's wife," instead.

I talked and told her I was calling to get the facts straight. I let her know everything Tom said.

"So you don't need to insinuate anything. I already know how you met, and what you did to him." I'd like to forget this next part but I was angry, hurt and angry, and she was cheap. "You'd better be careful about going down on strangers. Tom's clean, but sooner or later you're going to get a disease."

When she replied, she sounded tired. "Look, honey, you can believe what you want but Tom's no stranger. I met him his first time out here, last May. It wasn't a one night stand."

We hung up and then I felt tired. I didn't want to do much for the rest of the day, just lounged around and watched T.V.

"Well, it's no good anyway," says Tom, coming in from the garden. "The ground is too wet. I couldn't set out that early cabbage if I wanted to."

"Tom, don't start. It won't do any good."

"Don't start what? All I said was the ground was too wet."

"And I told you there wouldn't be a garden. Not this year."

"And who's going to tell her?" He jerks his head toward the homeplace.

"You? Now that she's gelling better? No, Louanne, I still have some say around here. I'm staying till fall and that's the way it is." He goes in the den and comes back again. "Why are you doing this? I thought all that was forgotten."

I fill the sink with soapy water. I don't answer. What can I say except then it was winter and I buried my feelings? Now it is spring and I want to be free. I want to talk to strangers. I do not want to be in the kitchen scraping plates while Tom transplants cabbages.

"Louanne, I'm talking to you." He comes and stands behind me. His breath is on my neck and any other time his hands would be slipping around me, thumbing my breasts, while I laughed and swore he was an aggravation. "Lou, 1 -" He takes a deep breath and we are so close I can feel his belt

buckle. 'Tm sorry. I said I was sorry then and I'm sorry now. But there's nothing more I can do. I mean it's done. It's over. What am I supposed to do?"

"You can do what you want," I tell him flatly, "I don't care."

I wasn't always this unforgiving. When he pulled in from Tulsa, I gave in. I was easy. I stood at the door, intending to be self-righteous, but when I saw him out in the yard, hanging around his van as if it were a life preserver, something inside me changed. "Come in, come in the house," I told him, and he came and I saw he was crying and I cried too, at his suffering and my pain.

"Did you love her?"

"God, no, how can you ask that?" he groaned, "I love you, Louanne. I do, really. I don't know how I got mixed up with her."

"Don't be so hard on yourself. You're a good man."

"No, I'm a loser. I've never done anything I was supposed to do."

"Tom, that's not true," I hesitated. Poor timing, but I had always wanted to say this. "You take good care of me and grandma . . . you do."

He looked up and the tears were pouring.

"I'll understand if you never want me to touch you," he said, "I'll understand if you never want me to touch you again."

As soon as I thought he was able, I led him upstairs.

But now I want to cry, and Tom is not sympathetic. I want to yell and storn and weep, and he acts surprised.

"That was months ago," he says, pinning me to the sideboard. "Ages. Why are you acting this way now?"

"Because adultery is a shock. Because I handled it too well." I raise up his arms and twist out from under him. "Because I thought if I were loving and forgiving my life would change."

"Look. Louanne, we can still have a baby. But you're gonna have to quit dodging me."

"I don't want your baby. I will not have your baby. I'd rather have sex with . . ." A parade of laces march across my tightly closed eyelids. I grab at the last, slightly unfocused but smiling, trustworthy, kind. . . the pope!"

Tom starts to laugh, then he looks at me. "You start fooling around and I'll kill you. Now come back here. We have to talk."

I shake my head and leave the kitchen slowly, maybe daringly because I know he won't follow. After last night we are both tired. Still, I go upstairs and barricade myself in the bathroom until I hear his van pull out of the yard. He doesn't come home until evening and then I busy myself with little things; washing my hair, putting new contact paper in the bedroom drawers. In the antique highboy, I find a pair of feet pajamas like a kid would wear, and I remember my wedding shower and how my girlfriend Marilyn brought them as a joke. In all our years of marriage I have never worn them, but tonight, after another hour in the bathroom, I put them on and slide into bed. The sheets are cool and clean and I keep them scented, but tonight I know I won't sleep. I am **awake** when Tom comes into the bedroom, but when he tries to touch me, a pitiful fumbling gesture I don't like to think about, I toss and pretend to snore.

"I've got the recipe for Dilly bread," Grandma tells me in the morning. She has it written out in sprawling longhand on the back of an envelope.

"You get yourself some yeast and a cupful of cottage cheese. Be sure to warm the cottage cheese in a pan. If you don't, the dough will go stiff and you won't be able to do a thing with it. Two and a half cups of flour and some dillseed . . . hello, Harbour," Grandma looks up when Tom comes into the kitchen. She always calls him by his last name. They have an easy relationship. She does all the things I don't want to do for him: irons his shirts, hems his trousers, cans apples in the summer so in the winter he can have homemade apple pie. The divorce will be hard on her, I think, but then I shrug. It will be hard on us all.

Tom straightens. He has been leaning over her shoulder, pretending to read her list. When I nod toward his chair, Tom throws his hand up. "Not hungry."

"Don't tell me you're on a diet too," says Grandma. "I'd like to see you get as old as I am. Then you wouldn't care about your weight."

"Is that a new recipe you're holding?" he asks. He is trying to change the subject and it works. Grandma responds at once.

"It's a recipe for Dilly bread. Helen came across it in last year's Southern Living." She locks back down and begins to rattle. Tom lights a cigarette and I watch him pull. ". . . and a tablespoon of instant onion and two of sugar and a pinch of salt. Don't forget to dissolve the yeast in warm water," says Grandma and then she stops. There 's silence. The sun cuts through the layers of smoky air. Tom squashes out his Marlboro.

"Sounds good," he says finally.

Grandma looks bewildered, like a child who has been tricked. I have seen this look on her face before. In the hospital, sometimes in the evenings. The physical therapist told me not to worry. "It happens with all stroke patients. They get confused. Expect her to have good days and bad. Expect her to cry and be moody. Expect her," and he laughed pointing to the pictures of the teenage daughters on his desk. "to act like a much younger woman."

"Tom, I'm going to bake bread this afternoon," I say, forcing our eyes to meet. "I'm going to have it with supper."

He lights another cigarette. "That's okay with me. If you're going to be busy, I'll just eat lunch in town. I've got to get some stuff done to the van."

"Where you going, Harbour?" asks Grandma.

He looks at me and this time he forces our eyes to meet.

"I'm not sure yet."

I rise to kiss him, aiming for his cheek, but when he turns his head, I keep my tongue in my mouth.

"See you around four?" Tom asks.

"Or later," I tell him. "I wasn't planning supper till five."

Grandma sits quietly. Tom forgets to tell her goodbye. I notice she has set her coffee cup on the recipe and I move it gently before it stains. She looks up, still puzzled.

"After I clean up the kitchen," I say loudly, "I'm going to start on it."

"Start what?"

"The Dilly bread. I'm going to make it for supper."

"Oh, of course, that's right. What was I thinking?" She lifts herself out of the chair. "I've got to get going. I've got work to do. I want to run the sweeper and take a bath before time for my programs."

I walk with her to the door. Again she goes down the steps unaided, but not because she has gumption. Today she wants to be let alone. I know she has had a stroke, I know she is past eighty, but watching her take the square cut stones that lead to her house, I am reminded of one of those sullen children who don't want to come in from recess.

I sigh and go back to the kitchen. I wash the dishes and study the field. The ground is not completely dry but if Tom wanted to burn it, it would go. This was the summer he was going to have a garden; this was the summer I was going to can - not just beans and tomatoes but everything. I wanted to go out in a big way. I wanted to pickle beets and make chowchow. I wanted to have a strawberry patch and make preserves. I wanted to clean the house from top to bottom, rebrick the fireplace, paint the shutters blue. Connie, the school librarian, told me this was a 'nesting syndrome', that some women got this way before starting a family. "I don't know about that," I told her, "I just want to do it." Now I am not of that mind. My own grandma has to remind me about cooking, the dust in the living room is half an inch thick, and the roof in the spare room leaks. I wonder what kind of place Tom will get when he leaves. I try not to be mean, but I hope it's a dive.

I get out the bowls. I let the yeast dissolve in warm water. I mix together flour and sugar and cottage cheese. Then I put it in a well oiled bowl and cover it with the towel I wiped my hands on. I stand at the sink, waiting. I am like this dough rising, I think, at first no reaction but six months later I am angry as hell. Tom knows it. Lately he has been looking at me as if I were a stranger. And that 's good because that is how I want to be seen. He has always known me as a familiar woman, for right from the start I loved him and so I came at him with no guile. But ever since Marie and Tulsa, in all these months of living and trying to be the same. another woman has been growing inside me. She takes me places: to town, to my Grandma's, sometimes to Tom's bed again until my eyes are wide open and I see what she sees - the familiar woman 's gone and last night I heard this new one say she wanted out.

I put my hands in the dough and find it is stiff and lumpy. Too late I remember to warm the cottage cheese. I pick it up in a blob and take it to the trashcan. I spend the rest of the day reading and digging out old lesson plans. Along toward four I make up a chicken and vegetable casserole. Along toward five I slap open a can of crescent rolls. Tom seems preoccupied over dinner. He doesn't mention the absence of Dilly bread.

"Louanne, I've been thinking," he says, pushing some broccoli around on his plate. "If it's another man you're wanting, I think I could handle it. I never thought I'd say this but if you -" He stops, looking as confused as Grandma. I could help him too, but I don't. "I mean, I know two wrongs don't make a right." Suddenly he's angry. His voice 's loud. "If it's revenge you're wanting, go on ahead."

"Tom," I say, "I don't want revenge. I don't want to lool around on you." The words come out slowly, painfully, because they are true. It hurts to be this open. I would like to hint at a mysterious stranger in my past but there is none. I would like to let a name slip but I haven't even been looking around. "I just want things to be the way they were before . . ." A pained expression crosses his face. I don't mention her name. "Well, you know. And they can't be - no matter how many times you say you're sorry."

He gets up from the table. He keeps his back to me. I think he is crying but the feelings in my breast are as heavy as lead.

"Tom, please stop it. I cried too, okay?"

I stand up and throw on a jacket.

"Where are you going?" he asks.

"I want to check on Grandma. She was acting a little funny today."

Grandma has her drapes pulled and her house is dark when I enter. It is a large house; six children were raised in it, one of them the mother I don't remember. I go through the living room and the dining room, and find her in the closed-in back porch off the kitchen. The T.V. 's on, but the sound is turned down so low I know she can't hear it. She is sitting on the couch, half talking, half singing a cradle tune. A heating pad 's pressed between her feet. She turns, sensing a presence.

"Martha?" she says.

I should expect this to happen. Still, it is a shock to be called by my mother's name.

"No, it's me. Louanne."

Grandma is looking directly at me.

"You were my pick," she tells my mother.

"Are you all right?" I ask, swallowing the lump in my throat.

"Of course I am." She clicks the heating pad up a notch and suddenly she is my grandma again. "I was just napping."

"Well, I just came to check," I hover in the doorway. I wonder if she knows I heard her talking, and then I realize she probably doesn't care.

"Come in a sit awhile. You can do that, can't you?"

I sit. She looks out the window, and when she turns back again, I am startled.

"It's not my fault, is it?" she asks. Her voice is a whimper but her eyes are wild, searching me. "It's not my fault he's going away? You should go with him. Go to Tulsa or Pittsburgh or wherever he wants. Don't let an old woman like me stand in your way."

"Grandma, listen," I take both of her hands. One is curled up tighter than the other and I am reminded of a game we used to play. She would turn up my chin and pluck my nose lightly, saying "Uh-uh, I've got it now," and her fist would shp behind her back, thumb peeking out between her fingers. I would run round her till I caught it, laughing and temporarily noseless, trying to pry her hand apart. Now I search for words. "You're not the reason. Tom's not the reason either . . . not anymore. Maybe it's my fault. I guess I can't . . ."

"Your grandfather wasn't always a mortician," she tells me abruptly. "He had to go to school to be one. you know." She tries to look me in the face but I turn my head thinking, oh boy, what a time to ramble. "He went to school in Cincinnati. He was so smart they had him teaching classes while he was going to school. He knew the meaning of every word in the dictionary, but all that summer he didn't write to me. I wrote and wrote and worried my head off. There weren't any jobs then and I had two children to raise. Your great-grandma Fraizer was alive then. She started coming

out to get me every morning, faithful as you please. She took me to her kitchen, got my hands in flour. I learned to make pies and cakes and biscuits. Light bread too. The kids played in the cellar." She closes her eyes and I strain with her, wondering what she sees. "I thought that old woman was crazy, wanting me to bake at a time like that."

The room is warm because the flames are leaping out of her gas heater. Under my arms and bra, I begin to sweat.

"Grandma, I tried that recipe you gave me. The dough was stiff and I dumped it out."

"Warm up the cottage cheese like I told you," She lets go of my hand and reaches for her afghan, "and turn up the T.V. when you leave."

I go back to the house and do the dishes. Tom is in the garage, fooling around. I use lots of water, trying to splash out the sounds of his tools loading, the thump of his suitcase against the bed of the van. I hear the meaning of those sounds so clearly that when he comes into the kitchen, I don't know it. When he says my name, I jump.

"Look at me," I say, pulling out my water soaked front. "I feel silly."

But Tom isn't smiling. He has something to say. "Louanne, this isn't working. I thought it stuck it out till fall you'd forgive me, but you're not. You're gonna hate me forever. I can tell by the look in your eyes."

And suddenly I hate him very much. Hate him, not so much for lying and cheating, but for giving up so easy. I want him to storm or rant or maybe even cry again, but I don't want him to walk away. If he doesn't know this, there's no way I can tell him.

"So you're going back to Tulsa?"

"I might," he shrugs. "But it's not what you think. That's where the work is."

"Oh," I start to leave the kitchen but he takes my arm and swings me around. "Is this what you want?" he asks.

It's my turn to shrug. "Whatever."

"Is that it? Whatever?"

"Well," I say, "I feel a little bad about Grandma. You know how she feels about you. When are you leaving?"

"In the morning after breakfast. I thought that would be the best time to say goodbye."

It is an odd evening. I know I should be thinking deep thoughts but I don't. I watch a rerun of the Waltons. Tom stays mostly in the kitchen, smoking, and a couple of times I catch him staring out the window at the field. We are quiet until right before bed, and then we have a small spat over money. Tom tells me he is going to send me some whether I like it or not.

"Just through the summer. Just until you can start teaching," he tells me.

"I'll send money orders so there's nothing you can do. Unless you want to tear those up, and I don't think you'd be that stupid."

I refuse to answer.

"I bet you'll marry in six months. A real quick turnaround."

I turn my face to the wall.

"Goodnight," he says, waiting, but I don't answer. I hear him go up the stairs and into the spare room and I know there is really no more to say. Once Tom is in bed, he'll be sleeping. He isn't one to brood.

It is chilly so when I go out on the porch I put my coat on. I sit in the swing and try to swing out as far as the steps. The chains protest. I think about Tom and me and me and Grandma; I meditate on Tulsa and little lumps in the bread. The wind turns colder and I wrap my arms about me, but when the air creeps up my sleeves, I give up. Inside, the house is quiet. Perhaps because it is late, perhaps because I do not like to be alone in darkness, I find myself standing in the spare bedroom at the foot of Tom's bed. His arm is flung out and as I move to cover him, I stumble over the boots he left lying at the side of the bed. They are stiff and muddy and suddenly I see him walking in the garden, kicking around in the leaves. I wonder what he sees in all that stubble. I could wake him and ask but I stand, staring, picking up his rhythm as he breathes.

The linoleum is cold in the kitchen, the sudden flip of the light hurts my eyes. I get out bowls and grease a pan and measure dillseed. I dissolve the yeast and warm the cottage cheese. Soon I am kneading, pressing, pounding out the dough till it is flexible, wondering at the energy of my fingers in the bread.

Only after it is in the oven do I realize I am exhausted. It is a hard job to be up all night baking bread. I doze in the den, waking to the sound of the timer, to the clean familiar smell of bread in the air. I open the oven door and, yes, it is perfect. The loaf has risen, the crust is golden brown. I slit it with a knife to check out the inside. The knife makes a deep slit but the blade comes out clean. I open my hand and balance the blade on my palm, undecided. What if Tom can't forgive me? No, for right now that doesn't matter. One step at a time is all I can manage. I hope when I ask him to burn the field he will know what I mean.

Joan Dew

A Word Is Worth A Thousand Pictures

I look into your face, it
seems to open wider with
every passing
star.

I look into the stained glass of
your eyes, I see a land of broken
skeletons, I see a rose
garden destroyed by the thought
of love.

Where is your face, that I used
to see in the moon. The eyes
are dull, the lips are torn,
the hair is brittle.

It is lonely with you.

Stephen R. Holley

Sestina: My Mother's Plants On My Mother's Porch

My mother's plants sit
on the rings of each pot
all about her porch
through every kind of weather
and all the seasons too -
the azalea, geranium, and summer fern.

The cactus, monkey grass and the fern
pose across from where Mother sits
and next to her her two
boys. (My brother moves a pot
to sit and asks whether
or not he can use the car, eyes on the porch.)

-Mother's answers take time. She takes her eyes off her porch
and ponders the oaks outside her plants, returning to the fern,
asks about the evening's weather
and bides her time, gets up from where she sits
and pokes fingers in black soil, rotates the pot,
says, "Be home by 2:00."

He kisses her cheek and is gone. I too
have a question. A snail slides over the porch -
halts, raises his head and nudges the azalea pot
in his way, veers off toward the fern.
Mother gets up from where she sits
and stalks the slimy trail, lips pressed tight, but the weather

booms across the purple sky. We're saved by the weather,
him from the salt and me too -
and from moving each plant from where it now sits
all around and then back around, all over the porch.
I'm praying for the snail to make it as he slips into the fern
and disappears. (She will have me search every pot!)

She looks down from the sky, from slime to pot,
from pot back up to plotting weather.
Her eyes, quick detectives, apprehend the fern
and the drying white line too.
She says, "Tom, get the salt, quick." She paces the porch,
now a general in command, then calmly sits.

The fern shares a healthy dose too
and the snail wrinkles up like the weather as Mother sits.
I check all the pots. "Now, what do you want?" she asks, on her porch.

A Change of Season

"Ole lady Mary is a witch. She done buried her husband in a ditch. She stole all the ole man's money and then done called it quits..." cried voices. The jittery legs marched back and forth in front of a white picket fence. They stopped only to laugh before beginning the chant again, skipping and tapping their feet on the first step of the porch, and daring one another to take another step. They danced and clapped, parading along the walk boldly. Gary was the biggest in the group. He was also the most daring. Sometimes he would even take three steps if he could get a sour ball or two out of the bag. "Shucks, I'll offa ya three of um if ya ring the ole lady's bell." A boy waved a hand full of the colored candies, attempting to entice.

"Gollee! I don't know about that. Don't seem like I'mma gettin much for my share in it...such a dangerous thing," said Gary, looking at the others. "Maybe you add another, I'll consider," bargaining masterfully, "You know, to make it worth the risk."

"I guess so, but you gotta go to the ole Lady Mary's door and then ya gotta ring the bell," said Andy setting clear the mission. "You've got it then," Gary was eager to carry out the assignment. "Matter of fact put two more of them there sour balls with it, and I'll tell her she's a witch straight to her face," he propositioned again in greed. The rest of the gang stood impatiently wailing.

"I betcha ya ain't gonna tell the whole thing to her face... huh... yeah. You ain't gonna do the whole thing," whined Carry while he lied his shoe ring in preparation for the run. "Only way I'd give you two more of um if you say it all, the whole thing," he added. Gary answered. "Okay I'mma try it all. Four sour balls or nothing," he demanded. "Well... I guess... okay it's a deal," said Charlie, slow to agree as the others cheered.

Gary mounted the steps slowly, walking straight to the door. The others trailed. He pressured his finger on the button, pushing it in quickly. There was a strong aroma of fresh greens simmering. He stood listening. He could hear scuffling across a bare floor. Yeah, she was coming. He could feel a light breeze blow against his face. Gary took a deep breath, and repeated the chant, "Ole Lady Mary is a witch..." He jumped and ran as a vibration shook his body. Ole Lady Mary slammed the door hard. The others were half way down the street. Gary strode, feeling his long loose jointed limbs. He met up with the rest of them. They laughed loud and hard, falling to the ground, breathing hard and holding their sides.

"Gimme my pay off..." asking before he could catch his breath good. "Ah... you ain't done like ya was suppose to. Ole Lady Mary slammed the door right in ya face, and you ain't finished saying it." Charles said pulling the big clump of candy from his pocket. "I'll give ya just three of um." "Huh... you's a cheat and you know it. Ya'll took off running like somethin one caught ya on fire before ya heard me finish it," Gary lied, swatting the candy from Charlie's hand, making all the pieces fall to the ground. "We'll eat it all... brat." Everyone scrambled to the ground, fumbling madly for pieces.

Charlie was angry. Everyone laughed and teased him as he backed away in a frenzy, yelling, "Ya'll jusla bunch of greedy jerks!" He headed home and the excitement calmed. The rest of the boys all stood around lazily arguing about what they'd do the next day.

A street light was flickering. Dusk arrived, providing a little relief from the summer's sun. It was time to eat supper. They could smell mixtures of the aroma of fried chicken, greens, hot rolls and roast tickling their stomachs. It seemed like all the folks in town all ate around the same time, probably because the houses were so close together. One person's cooking made

everybody else hungry. They quickly said good-byes, knowing that their mothers would come looking if they didn't hurry.

Gary's house was the last one on the way. He ran the rest of the way. He came in sight of Walley's store. A yellow light glowed from behind the white curtains. He mounted the steps and went through the screen door, hearing it bang behind him. There was a strong smell of fried fish, and corn bread. He ran to the kitchen, begging his mother for a quarter to buy some caps with. She put up the usual fuss, pointing her finger with one hand, and using a wooden spoon to stir the steaming cabbage with the other. She reached in her apron pocket and pulled a shiny new quarter, and shoved it reluctantly in his hand.

He struck out the door, quickly bolting through the door at Walley's store. He ran straight to the caps, looking them over. The store smelled of rotten meat. His mother would never buy a thing from Walley on account of how he kept things so filthy and all. Gary stood tapping the quarter against the dusty glass counter top.

"Hey! I'mma comin. Justa wait a second will ya?" answered a raspy voice from out the backroom. Gary stood listening. He could hear the announcer giving the play by play. Ole Mr. Walley slept in the back room. Gary heard the rubbing of stiff jeans.

"Whatcha be needin son?" Gonna gel some more of them there caps aincha?" He shook his head, "My what you younguns like to waste money on. Beller learn to save a nickel young feller," he added, while still nodding, pulling the caps from the case. Gary handed Mr. Walley the quarter and slipped the tiny box from his hand.

Gary walked out the door, and stumbled up the steps, then ran through the front door. He heard the screen door bang loudly behind him. He could see his mother standing by the stove, her head was bent low over the pan of corn bread.

"Gary is that you?" her voice was hesitant.

"Yeah Maw," said Gary walking to the kitchen, finding his usual place at the table.

"Oh no," whined an irritated voice. "You gel on up right now. Get in there and wash them filthy hands."

"Ah shucks Ma!" answered Gary as he slowly pushed away from the table.

"Your Paw oughta be home in a coupla of minutes. We'll wait a while on him," she yelled, so he could hear her in spite of the sound of running water.

Gary stared into the mirror as if he just noticed a reflection, while the water ran full blast. He searched the medicine cabinet, and reached for a powder blue glass bottle. This was the cologne his mother gave his dad several Christmases ago, he thought. It hadn't been used. He unscrewed the top and smacked some around his face. "Good grief," he complained, not liking the smell. He frantically rinsed it off, washing until there was no trace. He emptied some other liquid in the sink, then flushed the bowl with hot water, wanting his mother to think that his Dad had been using it.

He wondered why his mother always wanted to wait on his Paw for supper. He never came. He'd come in late in the night, after he'd have several drinks over at Starkey's. He frowned, thinking of how stupid his mother was being for getting up after she had gone to bed just to fix his plate. Yeah she would raise hell, but he couldn't think of one time when she'd just refuse and not do it. Seemed to him like all the women in town were meant to be church-goers and all the men drunks.

"Well I suppose we better go on and eat," he heard his mother's voice.

Gary took his seat and waited on his mother. She wearily pulled out her chair and collapsed in place. She briskly wiped her hands on her apron, and then clutched them together. She paused for a second, waiting on Gary to bow his head, before shutting her own eyes. She then proceeded to utter her usual blessings, alter which they ate. Gary forked through the fish, being careful of the bones. He dipped his corn bread in his cabbage, scooping it up and rinsing it down with milk. He looked at his mother uneasily out of the corner of his eye.

"How come ya always waiting on him," he spoke timidly, not looking up.

"Just trying to be a good wile. . . I took an oath with the Lawd, and besides . . ." she hesitated.

He glanced up, feeling sudden guilt. His mother was watching him.

"How come you askin?"

"Oh. . . I don't know. Reckon I was just askin," he said carefully, not looking up.

"Well I'm just hopin that you'll treat women like their suppose to be treated," she said, lowering her eyes.

They ate the remaining food in silence. Occasionally Gary sneaked a glance, somehow suddenly noticing the wrinkles across the forehead and the puffiness under the eyes. She looked awful. He fixed his eyes on her hands. They were dry and puffy. His mother reached over and patted his hand.

"Don't worry 'bout me none," she said flashing a quick smile, while pushing back in her chair. When he was in bed he could hear his Maw fumbling with the ironing board. Seemed like she worked all the time. Gary bet that sometimes she worked all through the night. Gary heard drops of rain, by the time it turned into a steady downpour he could hear his Paw's voice in the living room. Gary fell asleep, not quite satisfied with his mother's explanation.

Gary woke that morning to the usual whistling of the 7:00 train. Gary peeped at the clock. Yeah, he thought, she's right on schedule. He could hear his mother moving in the kitchen. Gary dressed and ate, then ran to meet up with his buddies over at the school yard.

"Shucks ya'll, What we gonna do today?" complained Charlie as he forced his sling shot in his back pocket. "Gee this is almost like school. We ain't gotta thing to do with ourselves." Everybody mumbled in agreement.

"How 'bout headin on over to ole Lady Mary's. Gary he'll tell her she's a witch," a voice cried hopefully. "Come on ya'll. What we standin around for?" added another voice. "Ah, I don't know. Why do I gotta do all the dirty work?" said Gary, with a hint of resistance in his voice. "Cause you the leader," replied Jerry. "Gollee ya'll," Gary replied, standing tall, towering over the others, "Let's get goin."

"Ole Lady Mary is a witch. She done buried her husband in a ditch. She got all the ole man's money and then done called it quits. . .," voices rhythmically carried the melody. They marched in line, repeating the chant, while stepping over the white fence that overlapped the sidewalk. Someone had tripped over it yesterday, tearing it from the earth, leaving it partly slumped.

"Come on Gary! Get on up them steps and tell Ole Lady Mary 'bout herself," Charlie yelled. "Ah, I might as well go on and get on out the way. Get them legs ready to run!" Gary shouted, wanting to get it over with. "Wait, gimme a second," someone yelled, pleading while checking out his shoes. "Okay. I'm ready!" signaling Gary to start. Gary took a deep breath as the others stood ready to take off running.

Gary walked slowly up the steps. He stood as tall as he could make his stature, thinking of how the others thought of him as the leader. "Yes, they looked up to him," he thought as he pushed the bell in. Gary stuck his chest out, and folded his arms just like his Paw did when he talked with someone in town. "Come on Ole Lady Mary," he said. "I betcha she's scared," he mumbled under his breath.

He waited several minutes. He couldn't hear anyone move inside. "What's 'akin so long?" a voice cried from the walk. Before Gary could answer, he heard footsteps. He felt strange. Again he listened intently. He heard nothing moving inside, then he turned to the window. Tear stained eyes peeped from behind a dusted window. Gary couldn't move. "Hey Gary! Where's ole Lady Mary?" someone asked. "Aw. . .," he couldn't make the words pass his lips. "She ain't home ya'll," he said, lying and feeling more shame than he'd ever feel again.

Jennifer E. Smith

Carvis Mills

The razor winds of November chisel through the valley,
cutting through the workers,
like the logs being borne against the spinning blade
at Carvis Mills.

The buzz of chain saws is interrupted occasionally
by the rasping cry of "Timber!"
and the crack of a large pine, giving up its stand.

The tree is stripped and chopped, hauled and split,
fashioned and shaped, pushed and pressed,
into boards and planks.

Soon the camp will shut down for the winter,
but until then, the men don their gloves
and sneak sips of whiskey.

Dan Miller

The End

I

Requiem for Civilization

Not by water but by fire, a baptism
of invisible rays: alpha, beta, gamma ... omega-ton.
Not the first death but the afterglow--
the apres-bomb, so to speak,
Wizened generals wove the pact
of mutual suicide: if I die you die.
Contrary to popular belief, you see,
most men lead lives of noisy desperation.
If even I may speak
Freely they entered into madness.
The irony, that Bible-thumping Armageddon
(when it happens, Ah'm a geddon outta here!)
was so firmly sworn to start in the
caught-in-the middle east (no capitals;
too much attention is paid it already),
was lost when Brazil launched the missile
that blasted the Honduras.

Naturally, Columbia retaliated.

Escalated.

Discombombulated.

Dropped the bombs.

Caught the bombs

in nets of flame, and the world grew silent
under the roaring fire.

II

The Sea of Flame

Towers toppled crumbling
into the sea of flame.

The silicon warfare monitors

Were made aware,

before they melted into glassy slag,
of the outcome of the same.

No Noah built an ark this time--

the stationary shelter was the rule.

No voice from heaven, though, did warn--

Conelrad fell mute victim

of the first moments.

The sea of flame, plasma tides rippling,

washed, tore, beat at the ionosphere,

and the radios were silenced

by the radiant.

III

Out of the Light into Darkness

A few, not many, survived
by accident, not by design, in caves, cellars, shelters.
A few, in the open air, far from the bursts
of the scarlet burning ocean
(for the strike was tactical, and the strength exerted
was not the planet-breaking maximum,
Praise the Lord, but hold the ammunition.)

Suddenly the word "metropolis"
had no more meaning than "pteranodon."
The fragility of such as the Teamsters' Union shows
when the highways crumble and semis are slag.
Overkill on the overkill, plague and starvation,
Cold, heat, petty insanity which, with no buttons to push,
must find something.

An old man in the ruins of the outskirts of Butte, Montana,
elects himself President over his battery-powered shortwave
and no one gainsays him.

Ah, Babylon! Ah, fabled Nineveh and New York, Tyre and Tallahassee
There were bombs enough for you all!

The gene pool (fragile pond!) is too small.

Too changed.

Those who come after, whoever they may be,

Will be not us.

And the silent sun sets over the sea of flame...

Alan P. Scott

Cold Spell

The glowing coals in the fireplace cast shadows on the wall as the woman moved about the room pulling a quilt higher, tucking a small foot, or arm under the covers, fussing over the three sleeping children. Brushing a strand of hair from her face with the back of her hand, she stooped and began stoking the fading embers in the grate.

A man emerged from the curtain that separated the room. He buttoned his shirt and began pulling on his boots.

"Get Aaron up, Lena, we'd better get started."

She shook the shoulder of the boy sleeping beside the cookstove on the col. "Wake-up son, your lather needs your help." He tumbled from bed, rubbing his eyes. He poked an arm through the over-sized coal his mother held out for him. She helped him with his shoes and pulled his cap down over his ears. "Keep that scarf up around your neck, the wind is sharp."

The man pulled his heavy jacket from the peg behind the door and slipped it on-then glanced towards the crib in front of the lire.

"Lennie any better?"

"Some-his lever's finally dropped." Lena looked at her husband with tired eyes. "Be careful Karl."

He put his arm around her and pulled her close. "Try to get some rest before Lennie wakes. We won't be long." He turned towards the door.

Lena quickly closed the door before the blast of cold air could invade the room. She had to save what heat they had-this cold spell had taken its toll. And Karl out of work-he had tried so hard to find work, any kind of work, as hundreds of others were doing, but there was nothing to be found. She sensed anger and frustration building up inside him. She moved her hands restlessly, straightening the laded blue blanket covering Lennie, soothed the warm brow, and moved her hands in her lap as she sat beside the sick child-as he by so doing she was keeping her world together.

Karl pulled the wagon away from the side of the house and they started down the hill. Aaron trudged along behind. Snowflakes like leathers drifted down on his lace. He stuck out his tongue-snowflakes tasted like nothing, exactly nothing, he decided.

They moved on down the path and beside the creek that was silent and white. He remembered the fun he and his friend, Tony, had last summer playing with their wooden guns, and shooting the rubber bands his lather had cul for them from an old inner-tube. Sometimes they would shoot across the creek, other times he and Tony would hide in the brush along the path and ambush the younger children.

Up ahead his lather looked like a giant plodding along in the blizzard. Aaron hurried to catch up. He tried to pace his steps with his father's but the flapping sound coming from his shoe slowed him down. The band of rubber that had held his shoe together had slipped-the cold air drifted in the gap and his toes were past feeling even through the two pairs of woolen socks his Mom made him wear. His body felt all warm and tingly inside the great coat and his ears were warm. Aaron was glad his father needed his help-he was the oldest. Besides his brother Ben would never have kept the secret. He'd have to tell someone or split a gut.

They moved past the schoolhouse and the church. The village was quiet. All the stores were dark, the only light coming from a truck stop at the other end of Main Street. They crossed the street, then turned down behind the old boiler plant towards the railroad yard. As they got closer, Aaron could make out a line of box cars on the track. Down the tracks the red lights on the trestle glowed through the snow.

Karl turned to the boy. "Keep an eye out, if you see or hear anything, whistle-not loud, just enough to alert-you know how." The boy nodded. He looked at the sleeping Chessie cat on the side of the boxcar. He stood shivering, the wind blowing sharper now as he stood beside the tracks. Karl climbed to the top of the coal car and began throwing off chunks of coal. Aaron scrambled about picking it up and tossing it into the wagon.

Aaron didn't have much time to think about whether it was wrong to do what they were doing. Once in a while a thought would squeeze its way into his mind-something his Sunday School teacher had said, but he knew his father was a good man, a kind man. He worked harder, his face stung from the cold, and his nose ran-he swiped his nose with his sleeve.

When the wagon was as full as they dared, Karl swung down from the train. They started towards the wooded area at the upper end of the tracks that would take them around the village and cut-off some of the distance back home. As they rounded the corner of the train a beam of light struck them full in the face.

"Stop! Hold it right there!" Aaron made out a uniformed figure behind the light. "Where do you think you're going..." then as recognition dawned on him, "Karl-why Karl Mullins!"

Aaron moved beside his father, and his father reached out and pulled him close, his big hand resting on his head. Aaron shivered, but not so much from the cold now.

"I've known you for years, Karl. I wouldn't have thought a thing like this ..."

Aaron felt his father stiffening, and shilling his weight from one foot to the other. His voice sounded low and strange.

"I did what I had to do."

Aaron looked up at his lather's face but he couldn't tell what he was thinking. His face was set and his eyes looked straight ahead.

The railroad detective looked at the streak running across the boy's coal dust blackened face and down his cheek. The rippling noise coming from the boy's gasping-soled shoe as he rolled it back and forth across the gravels was the only sound heard in the stillness.

Finally, the railroad man cleared his throat, looked around, and said. "Get on home Karl. your missus will be waiting." He stepped aside and let them pass.

The wagon creaked under its heavy burden as they made their way up the hill through the peppering snow. Aaron looked back over his shoulder at the mountain of coal and thought, it'll be covered by the time we get home.

Rose L. Davis

Lament for Michael

My beautiful dark haired boy
that I made up from a character list
scrawled on a notebook.
I made you handsome
with soft brown eyes
and smart, yes, you read
Aristophanes for fun.

But I made you live alone
in my story and gave you
no one to love you back.

I made you sad because I was sad.

I killed you on page nine-
but you didn't bleed, Michael,
and you didn't hurt,

of that I made certain.

You died a beautiful death
in flight like a bird.
You died as Mozart played-
you liked Mozart
because there were no words.

I numbed you in my mind
before your car swerved from
the wet mountain road,
before you met the treetops, and
before the music stopped.

Lee Wood

Forgotten Jacket

This morning the driveway is stillempy
except for spots of oil
almost washed away by rain.
I dreamed you out there
digging for the car in the snow,
uncovered hands brushing it away from the windshield
meticulously, like it was spilled sugar.

I sit in the kitchen beside unopened mail
and drink coffee from your cup-
there's a hundred tiny cracks inside
like spiders' webs,
each one filled with the ochre stain.

The days have abandoned their names
since the dust moved in,
it sleeps on the edges of the shelves
where your books hadn't been,
it hugs the forgotten jacket
on its hook in the hallway,
the shape of you still in it,
time clings to it like regret.

I stare out the window and wonder
how do I fill the empty spaces,
in the closet-
in the medicine cabinet-
beside the one face
that stares back from the mirror.

Lee Wood

Visiting Rites

He had lain there for almost a quarter of an hour-prone on his chest, his tousled head pillowed in his hands. She had startled him awake by pressing her nose into the strong nape of his neck. It felt cool on his skin. They lay across each other on the warm bed at the hotel. The curtains were pulled on the night. The new year had been below freezing since its start three days ago.

"You tired, Ben? I'd say last time was a candidate for most sensual this year," she said, reaching across his back to the shadowy night table. She removed a small bottle of perfume from the table. He liked her to wear perfume. She silently dabbed herself on the neck with the little bottle. He replaced the bottle on the table for her. She curled atop him rubbing her chest across his strong back.

"Who's tired? You're really wonderful, you know that? I think I'll remember that time, too," Ben said, knowing he was tired and absently aware he would forget their making love.

"You up to it, Ben? You don't look it. Can't you roll over or anything?" Maggie said, tugging at his right arm to further the act along.

"All right, already," Ben said. Jerking quickly over he laced her in a sitting posture.

The telephone rang loudly and professor Benjamin Wattle answered it with an assumed, professional voice, one he reserved for students and younger colleagues. "Hello. Can I help you?"

"Ben? Ben, what do you mean, 'Can I help you?' Who else would be calling you in Chicago this late? You do remember why you're still in Chicago, don't you? Jesus Christ," the voice on the telephone said to him, sounding fatigued and irritated at him. Outside, on the streets below, the wind swept steadily off the lake.

"Damn it all. I apologize for sounding so stiff, Bettina. I should've known it was you, but I just woke and my head's all empty. You understand, of course. Don't you?" Ben pleaded as he suddenly felt Maggie's foot tickling him in the ribs. He removed her foot and stared roughly at her as he listened to the voice on the phone-his ex-wife's.

He had arrived in Chicago a week ago to visit his estranged wife and her children. A taxi had brought him from the airport to her apartment on Christmas Eve. He checked into a Sheraton hotel on State Street shortly thereafter.

Their settlement had guaranteed him visiting rights during the Christmas and New Year's holidays to see his children. He annually flew to Chicago from Norman, Oklahoma, where he taught political science. His children were always elated to see him; however, his ex-wife remained nervous and uncomfortable around him. Yet she was stoically friendly and answered his questions without denying him the small lore of his offspring.

During the second evening of his visit, Christmas night, he and Bettina joined a party in a nearby apartment on the same floor. She had introduced him to most of the guests there. He met her best friend, Margaret Chadwick, an advertising heiress, and was schooled at once by her gaze that she wanted to have an affair with him.

Ben's relationship with his ex-wife had become a series of long-distance phone calls, monthly child support checks, and his limited visiting rights. He had been a teacher at Oklahoma University since his divorce four years ago. His position there was an exceptional niche from which to follow his academic inclinations, and receive a full professorship at the same time. He was held in high esteem by his colleagues and students. Many of them thought he would become an important consultant or speechwriter to a political

figure sometime in the near future. His marriage to Bettina and the local controversy surrounding it in another time and place was overlooked.

Their marriage had got off to a jubilant enough beginning, but soon after their son was born took the appearance of a misshapen structure. They had married only four months before his arrival. Another pregnancy soon after that came to term and was delivered the following year. She was named Kay, and their son, Rodney. Bettina was still an underclassman then, and she gave up much of her youth and frivolous ways when she gave birth to the second child. Ultimately she clung to him and their children more closely than she did to any will of her own.

Her parents were one of the more wealthy, illustrious North Chicago families. They readily agreed to her most unimaginable desires and her marriage to the young, good looking, self-confident teacher wasn't argued. She attended Smith College then, in Northampton, Massachusetts, where he had just joined the faculty as an assistant professor of international affairs. During a winter-to-May romance they had fallen in love and decided to marry.

"Ben? Are you still there?" Bettina said.

"Yes. Why are you calling at this time of night? It's almost four in the morning," Ben said, looking over his shoulder for an instant at Maggie, nude, sitting on her shins watching him cattily.

"Haven't seen Maggie around lately by chance, have you?" she asked restively from the thick black telephone.

"No. I haven't heard from her all week," Ben replied.

"I've been calling her for several days and nobody answers. I know her husband left town on business but I didn't know she had joined him," Bettina said absently.

"How are the children?" Ben asked.

"Your son and daughter are sound asleep," Bettina stated.

"I guess Kay and Rod told you about seeing her at the park-Chicago's still provincial, good gosh. I talked with her while watching the children in the zoo," Ben said methodically, concealing any emotion. Maggie batted her eyes as she listened into the phone.

"She may have decided to visit her family-oh yes, now I remember her telling me at the party she might have to leave town for a few weeks if she had any..." Bettina mumbled as her voice trailed off behind her.

The conversation's subject meanwhile lay back curling her legs to her chest, using her long arms to draw them closely into the fold of her body. She brushed a long wisp of her brown hair from her face. She was smiling. Her smile pretended to be girlish but had the cleverness of a good actress read into it. She began pulling her hair back into a tight tail, resembling a young girl's.

"Sometimes my memory doesn't serve me well at night," Bettina said. The hotel room was furnished very conservatively. A large, expensive paneled desk, a small bureau, two heavy chairs, and the bed they were in was its only furniture. Maggie turned on a small lamp above the headboard. The room smelled of perfume and musk they had worn through the night. Their clothes were loosely strewn about, yet Ben's coat and slacks were draped neatly upon one of the ladder-back chairs. His tie was slipped over the lamp's neck.

The first year he and Bettina were married was punctuated by a hundred moments when life brimmed with love and courage. He had showered her with constant attention and companionship in the last month of her first pregnancy. Upon discovering herself pregnant at school she was initially

upset, but soon gained her composure and attended classes until the last week of her pregnancy. She blamed him, even though they had mutually agreed not to have children until she had completed school. She often made him notice as she swallowed the pill.

Following the birth of their second child, Kay - the image of Bettina - he began caring for the baby without sharing her affection with Ben much, outside her thoughts. She watched Kay every day; she hardly let the child out of her sight. She rarely let him hold the baby or be alone with this daughter. He continued teaching at Smith, tentatively, while Bettina mothered the children. The college, a women's college, followed their marriage studiously. Bettina began to find life there an ordeal while Ben followed his academic and not-so-academic caprices.

"What were you dreaming about, or who, should I ask?" Bettina said furtively.

"The papers and mail being delivered to my office and home is uppermost in my dreams tonight - and the children," Ben said. "I assure you."

Bettina, at the other end of the phone, paused a second thinking she had heard someone feigning a laugh on his end of the phone. She concluded instantly that it was just her imagination.

"Are you all right? You sound different," Ben stammered. He sat upright in the bed with his back cushioned by two pillows. Maggie remained lying diagonally across the bed. She seemed proud of her nakedness - defiantly so, with her curved legs pulled to her chest and then lowered in fits of exercise. The lamp's light glowed warmly off her firm skin. Her body's flexibility spoke for itself as she stayed in the scissored position with no visible discomfort. He like her body.

"Everything's fine, Ben. Stop concerning yourself with how I am. You keep the children happy and healthy, along with yourself. That's what's important," she said, "and that you shouldn't forget."

She paused on the phone again, proceeding to speak after a loud swallow.

"Ben, I don't mean ill toward you - I thought you were a reasonable husband," she said. "Well, I should let you sleep some this morning. I may go for a walk or paint for a while."

"Bettina, you are reconciled to our divorce, aren't you? Why'd you need to talk with Maggie this morning?" Ben said. He watched Maggie slowly creep to him, her curls draped over one shoulder. Maggie's perfume freshened his thoughts of the eroticism he had known with her in the night, moments ago. He like the way she moved.

"Ben, I just wanted to talk about us again. I've been alone almost every day and night since you left. I'm lonely," she said, clearly indicating she wanted recompense for her loneliness with his maleness.

"But you couldn't love only me, could you? You had to have a line of women in love with you. God damn you, Ben," she said with a strained ache in her voice.

"Bettina, I think we've discussed this four thousand times before..."

"That proved I couldn't trust you and then it only became a matter of time anyhow. Now...! know you won't believe this, but...can I come over to your room?" she asked, halting anxiously.

He ranged a moment in his thoughts for an appropriate response to her entreaty. Ben glanced at Maggie, in her folded repose again. Her buttocks stared at him firmly. However soft he knew she was, she looked Jean and muscled in the rays of the somber lamp.

Finally, she rolled over his legs onto the floor to pick up his shirt and cover her refund modesty. Maggie apparently realized, without a doubt, her friend - his ex-wife - wanted to join the man she had just loved. She fixed a scotch and water for them. She avoided looking into his eyes as she handed the plastic glass to him. She spilled a little on the bed.

"Uhhh - Bettina. You should try getting some sleep tonight. It would be difficult for us, don't you think? Don't you?" Ben said warily, as he stared at Maggie through a mirror facing her length. Her long dark-wood shaded hair concealed much of her back.

"There's nobody with you, is there?" Bettina said, as if frightened of her own question.

"No. Of course not. I don't think you sound well. I think you should see a doctor later on this morning, just as a precaution - you can never tell," Ben said, handing the glass back to Maggie as she watched his eyes. Maggie grinned.

"Ben, I said I was all right. If you could only understand me once... Well, I knew I was asking too much of you," she said. She was angry.

"Why don't you take something and sleep a while, Bettina? Try sleeping for a while. Please treat your health carefully."

"You sound like a ninny," Bettina said.

"Maybe I am a ninny," Ben said.

"Ben, I know I shouldn't have asked you that. I'm sorry, but I needed to know. Are you drinking?" she asked suddenly with a calming note to her voice, as if she smelled the scotch.

Not wanting to continue his deceit any further than he had to, Ben said, "Yes. I'm having some brandy. It makes me sleepy at night, or what little is left of it. Maybe you should try it."

"I've drank almost a quart of gin tonight, already. I wish Maggie were home. You're still the insensitive boob I always thought you were. Go back to sleep, and say 'night to your whore for me. Goodbye," she said quickly, ending the call. He listened an extra minute into the phone. Then he dropped the phone into its cradle with an exasperated sigh. The curtains now hinted at the silver outlines of the immediate skyline on the new morning. It was developing into another unspectacular sunrise.

"She's such a nice person. But you would think she could find someone other than me all the time to cry on," Maggie said to Ben, annoyed at the Jong interruption.

They continued sitting on opposite sides of the bed for a time. "She not only wanted to talk with you - she wanted to come over here. That's just great... wonderful. One big, happy family. Why not? Should've told her to bring the kids, too."

An hour later, seventeen floors beneath the windows of the hotel room on State Street, a bus stopped to unload its passengers. Bettina was among those passengers.

The street was congested with packed lanes of dull, fuming traffic. The street's cold sidewalks filled early with clean shaven, costily clothed office workers. Yet, the morning remained icy and impervious to the mass human exodus to work. The walk's margins were piled with banks of forgotten, lead-colored snow that hid and marked the curb's lines. A row of taxi exhausts, in a line before the hotel waiting on fares, puffed clouds of fumes and filth into the motionless, zero-degree air. Their fares generally went to the airport or to another hotel, usually to O'Hare International Airport. The cabbies liked to take fares to the airport - good tips. In the hotel lobby, the staff was changing shifts as Mrs. Waite inquired about her former husband. A policeman was evicting a noisy wino from the hotel's doorway. It was very cold.

Ben and Maggie slept furtively like birds, listening for a knock at their door in their subconscious, although he had placed the 'Do Not Disturb' sign on the outside of the door. After a short nap they fell back into each others' curves and muscles.

"Bettina is something of a strange bird. Have you noticed? She never sleeps and I would swear she eats less than one. Did she tell you she drinks now...gin," Maggie said. She turned her profile to him and polished off the scotch as if it were a cherry soda.

"Yes, she told me. Sometimes I feel sorry for her and then I remember the divorce proceedings. She brought up names - names of other people I was acquainted with casually. It ruined some of their marriages also. There were a couple of my students mentioned, too, and when she was finished I was ruined and through teaching in New England or anywhere else in the East," Ben said.

"She told me about it," Maggie said.

"She certainly isn't welcome here. The children I plan to see one more time before I catch my flight next week. You want another drink? I do," he said, taking the glass from her long thin hands.

"She wouldn't surprise you here, would she?" Maggie asked.

"Never. She knows I'm still bitter about the damn divorce and all the hell she made of my life," Ben said.

"Can I have my drink?" Maggie asked.

"Sorry. Here. Let's stay in bed and have breakfast," Ben said, with a hinting squeeze of the inside of her thigh.

"Uh-huh. Yes...! would like that. Don't start anything you can't finish, though," Maggie said, stretching seductively like a distinctive, well-bred cat from its nap.

He finished her drink with one swift gulp and reached for her small waist which moved reflexively into his hands. His head dropped to her breasts. He exposed them from behind the sheet she was wearing across her

shoulders. Her hands guided his slowly onto her breasts and to the plane of her stomach. The late hour and his ex-wife were not remembered. Passionate noises grew from the hollows of their hearts and very souls.

Bettina was now unhappily thinking, in the hotel lobby, of a day when she had found Ben sleeping with another woman. She sat in one of the lobby's corners with a key to Ben's room. The clerk had given it to her after she had produced a row of credit and identification cards wrapped in a fifty-dollar bill. She was dressed in a running outfit. A light tan parka was pulled over her sweats. Her tennis shoes dangled nervously from her long, shaky legs, looking expensive and chic. She sported her looks with a brightly designed blue handkerchief tied around her forehead. Her blond mane was fashionably disordered. She seemed filled with promise and youth.

For the preceding hour she had questioned herself as to surprising him with a visit or calling him again. Shortly after that she decided upon using a pay phone in the lobby. She wanted to talk to him about doubts and guilt that overcame her as she watched their children grow older. She sometimes believed that Kay and Rod blamed her for their father's separation from them.

The telephone rang rudely without warning in his room. His and Maggie's ardour collapsed on the rocks and roar of anxiety as to whom was calling. Ben sat on the edge of the bed and took a deep breath; he poured another scotch and waler, then answered the phone.

"Benjamin Waite. Can I help..." He said.

"Ben, stop the stupid formality. I'm not one of your slavish grad students. Did I wake you again?" Bettina said.

Maggie had begun to take a pull from the drink he had mixed. Her nudity still glowed in the shut-in, scattered darkness of the room without any light to accompany its aura. She quietly disappeared into the bathroom with her purse, the scotch, and a scowl.

"I should let you sleep, but I want to talk. I know. It's early and you don't want to talk and I apologize..." Bettina said into the phone downstairs, as men passing by her in the lobby admired her good looks. Passing women whispered envious and some complimentary remarks about her style of dress and looks.

"I wasn't asleep. What's wrong, Bettina? The children are line, aren't they? So why the hell are you calling here?" Ben said, rolling his eyes. He spoke slowly.

He could hear the voices of people passing by her. She had left her apartment; he knew it immediately. Asking where she was would lead to a bemoaning, "What do you care?", he could second-guess. His jaw twitched involuntarily. He listened to her explanations and apologies.

"Ben, do you remember when we first met? And how you correctly assumed I was a painter? Well, I've never known what it is to be a painter," Bettina said. As she spoke she stared at a big print of a Parisian street scene hung upon the hotel lobby's wall. The figures in it were drinking and singing.

"Listen, Bettina, I want you to go home and take a pill and try to sleep. Do you have it in your head to make me anxious about you? Well, you have. I'll see you later today," he said, visibly upset at her.

"One needs talent and steady hands to paint with oils. I always dreamed and hoped for grandeur and wall-shaking for my work. Huh. Some grandeur. I'll never hear those trumpets tearing my walls down," Bettina said, her voice starting to choke with self-pity.

"I can drop by this morning to see you and the children if you'd like that. Can't we talk then?" Ben said.

"Am I still keeping you from her? Oops, I'm sorry again," Bettina said, sobbing into the phone.

"No, you're not keeping me from anyone. Everything is going to be fine, Bettina. I wish you would sleep a little while, though. And you are a damn fine painter," Ben said.

Sounds of glass breaking and loud voices coursed out of the distant phone swinging from his station seventeen floors below him. The noise gradually died as he listened to and for Bettina's voice through the telephone. It sounded like she was explaining an awkward accident to someone.

"Bettina! Bettina! Bettina, are you all right?" Ben shouted. He considered calling the police at the same moment he had heard the glass shattering. But then he realized he didn't have a clue to where she was calling from. Maggie hurriedly returned from the lighted bathroom. She grasped Ben's bicep as she listened into the phone, her face beside his.

He could still hear voices, including Bettina's, yet the helplessness of another moment like this one long ago entered his thoughts.

"Don't worry, Ben. It was just a stupid, glass-framed print of some revelers in Paris. You know the sort. Every hotel lobby has them. I bumped into it and it fell—that's all. Everyone stared at me like I had been drinking or wasn't well. Anyhow, everyone in the print was drinking," Bettina said laconically. "Are you certain I didn't wake you? I just needed someone to talk to."

"Please go home and take two of those pills and sleep. Don't bother with the frame and the print--have someone get in touch with me about it, all right? And for the last time, you didn't wake me. Where are you--downstairs?" he said, mad at his own powerlessness to prevent something he felt may be imminent. He was not reconciled to the situation over the phone.

"I'm going to catch the bus and ride a while. Can you and your bitch there call the children today and see to it that they catch their bus?" Bettina said soberly.

"Bettina, why don't you tell me where you are? I could call you a taxi. Are you still there?" Ben was still preoccupied with a past thought.

"Ben, you should try to get some sleep too, sometimes. Stop worrying about my whereabouts. You're an old granny, you know it? I don't want to tell you where I am, so stop the prying. If you only knew," she said, giggling.

"Bettina, I know we're divorced and I'm not supposed to worry about you, but I'm afraid for you right now. Tell me where you are," he said. Maggie returned to the bathroom. She began running a bath on a sudden whim.

"We are divorced, Ben. Exactly divorced. God, I only wanted to talk to somebody," Bettina said distantly.

Ben noticeably shivered. I only get up to Chicago once a year and when I do she runs me through a psychological wringer, he thought. At the very same time the sound of the waler splashing in the bath reminded him of another woman he had known at Smith. She had drowned herself after reading of his wedding. Nobody quite understood why except himself and he never had the courage to step forth with any details of their affair. He regretted his cowardice.

"Bettina, can you get back to your apartment without me?" he asked.

"Yes. Why?" she said.

"I'd like to talk with you about something I just remembered," he said. "It's about our wedding."

"Certainly. Sometime next year. I hope I haven't disturbed your conscience--have I?" she asked.

"Bettina, do painters ever create portraits or still-lives from a mirrored image to their canvas?" he asked.

"I couldn't ever paint a mirror image. No great loss, though. Painters should divorce mirrors and reflections, too. You agree, don't you? Well," she said.

"I used to think so, but I'm not so sure anymore," he said.

Maggie whispered from the opened door of the bathroom, "Did she take her pills?" She had tied a white bath towel around her chest and stomach. Streams and beads of waler ran off her onto the carpet.

"I'll be over soon. Don't bump into any mirrors, or prints and such while you're wailing. Sometimes you may see something you wanted to forget," Ben said.

"Goodbye, Ben," Bettina said.

"Bye, bye, Bettina. You will go home now..." he said. She had hung up. The telephone buzzed with the echo of her call.

"What were you talking about with her?" Maggie asked.

He was quiet and had started brimming with the remorse his life had sidelined in the past and it would in his present. She coiled into the bed, watching his face for a reaction to the conversation with Bettina.

"I don't know. I don't know whatever happened," he said.

Maggie fell back among the pillows he had vacated. She lit a cigarette and telephoned the kitchen for breakfast. "She's all right now, Ben. It was just an accident downstairs or wherever. I've seen her drunk before."

"If she would only see a doctor or a... Her parents must know. The children don't know she's drunk, do they? There was something in her voice I didn't like. I've heard it before. And the bath," Ben said.

"What are you talking about? Have you been dreaming?" Maggie asked.

"Let's get dressed," he said roughly.

She lay still, following him with her eyes around the room as he picked up articles of clothing that belonged to him. He went into the empty, humid bathroom. His grief mingled with the slinging hot waler of the shower. His back was very tired and sore.

Hot Air Balloons and Other Things

Paddles
of wind
push murky water
over a thin shelf of ice
clinging to shore.
Long
desert flats
of cracked mud
stretch down to a water's edge
shrunk from the shore.
Docks
stand
tall
out
of
water
like
flamingos,
black, dead algae
marking summer's pool level on their legs.
The only boaters are two scrawny mallards
probably wondering what they're doing on
Beech Fork lake when they could be wintering
in Miami Beach.
The sky is so low with clouds,
that you can reach up and touch it.
High in that sky a greater fool than I rides
a bag of agitated oxygen, nitrogen, water vapor,
argon, CO₂, and traces of other gases.
The balloonist's pale lips mouth, "Hellllloo."
Or is it, "Helllllp."
Gertie, the tawny bloodhound,
paws stiff ground, wincing as ice encrusted
pads scratch her ears.
Her tongue hangs low,
like a wet, red necktie.
Above the howl of wind, the twins Shurman and Hurman
squeal as they play frisbee
with a frozen pumpkin pie.
Custard is more sensible for a frisbee
but,
pumpkin is in keeping with the season.
Mother stomps a hole in the ice
and rinses baked beans and potato salad
from plasticware and everyday paper plates.
I shake snow from the blanket
and we pile into the fuchsia Corvette.
Another traditional Christmas Eve picnic ends.

L. E. Welch

One That Didn't Get Away

My rickety red bike
carried me hesitantly
but risking a wreck
was better than walking.
I'd ride by your house
at the end of the road,
right by the fishing pond,
after school everyday.
I'd fiddle with my rod
and look toward the lake
trying to show
an interest in the fish.
It was really you
I was hoping to catch.

You never seemed to
notice my existence.
Instead you'd sit lazily
on your front porch,
trying to play the guitar.
The music was terrific.
That's been such
a long time ago.
Your house is still there.
Now we sit on the porch together.
You still play the guitar.

Lisa Harvey

A Deflated Education

On a chilly day in May
The wind blew briskly
Cars sped at fifty down Fifth Avenue
Papers flew across the black pavement
Black tire tread marks that look like bird footprints
Left their mark on the paperback textbook
Dropped by a distraught student.

Lori Jett

Don't touch me with your hands

Your fingers spread eagle across my back.
How much do you think you can touch
with those ten padded bones?
You can't touch me with your hands.

I need to touch your heart
as it beats against your backbone,
deep within the bony cage of your ribs.
Your heart is as smooth and cold as bone.

Mary Sansom

Noses

clink in angled intimacy
like champagne glasses
before lovers drink
(their glasses rub softly
because they've touched enough).
When noses brush
it's a thin skinned kiss
that momentarily forgets the lips
(while they lick the rim
for more champagne).
When noses touch
it's a bony vertical kind of kissing
that inspires other kissing.
Two minds propose a toast
when noses kiss.

Mary Sansom

Hide Away the Broken Dolls

It was Saturday afternoon, and Kim was staring out of the window at her garden. Rick was getting something done to the car at a garage, and she didn't have much to do except wait for him. She was trying to convince herself that the garden didn't really need weeding when she heard a shrill scream. Across the porch of the cottage in the alley strode a slovenly woman, half-dragging, half-carrying by one arm her squealing little girl. In her other hand she carried a large switch. The door slammed shut and Kim could hear the child's screams floating across the alley to her open window.

The comfortable apartment Kim shared with her husband Rick was in an old, beautiful house in a decaying neighborhood. The large window in their living room faced an alley behind the house. Across the alley was a small, decrepit cottage, where lived Gail and her three underfed, filthy children. A succession of greasy boyfriends filtered listlessly in and out. Kim took special notice of the children, especially the oldest, the little girl. Janie was her name. She was five years old but looked three, she was so small and pale and withdrawn. Kim had talked to the child a few times as Janie played in the dirt yard outside her house. She was charming after her first shyness, and Kim was curious about her.

"Hi, there."

Kim turned from the window, wondering how Rick had got in without her hearing him. "Hi," she said, without enthusiasm.

"The car's fixed. The guy at the shop put in a new alternator."

"What's that?" She didn't want him to think she didn't care. He might as well think she was interested in everything he did and said.

"Oh, it charges the battery, among other things. What's wrong?"

"That slut across the alley has been beating on Janie again," she blurted.

"People like her shouldn't be allowed to live." Suddenly she was crying, with real pains in her chest, and Rick was holding her.

On Monday morning Kim was late for work. She had brooded about Janie all weekend and couldn't sleep Sunday night because of an aspinning-ignoring headache. Rick had tried to cheer her up by taking her to the art gallery and then for a walk in the woods, but she had only smiled once or twice all day. Rick grew tired of trying, and left her to her depression most of Sunday afternoon. The work day was typical, though, and she began to feel comfortable in the mindlessness of routine. She was complacent as a cat when she left the boutique, where she worked as a window dresser, at 5:00. She decided to walk the eight blocks home and window-shop. In a display at a children's clothing store she saw a beautiful blue velvet dress with lace cuffs, a matching shawl collar, and a white satin sash. The mannequin was small and colorless, with a shabby blond wig and painted blue eyes. Kim had wanted a child, a girl child, since her marriage, one she could buy dresses like that one for. Rick wanted to wait--he thought they should get used to one another first. Kim couldn't argue, for his reasoning made perfect sense. So she stayed on the pill and waited, and spoiled her friends' children.

When Kim got to the alley behind her house, she saw Janie playing in the dirt, barefoot, topless, wearing only a pair of dirty yellow polyester shorts. She ran towards Kim and held out a grubby hand.

"Look what I got!"

"What do you got?" Kim smiled warmly at the little girl. Janie pushed a lock of matted blond hair out of her eyes and grinned.

"See." She opened her hand to reveal a beautiful pink pebble.

"Oh, how pretty! Where did you find it?"

"Over dere." Janie pointed to the gravelled driveway behind Kim's house.

"You can have it, 'cause I found it in your driveway, so it's really yours."

"That's very sweet of you, Janie, but you did all the work. I think you should keep it."

"Can I? Oh, boy!" A door slammed and Jame's mother appeared on the porch.

"Jame! I told you not to go across the alley!"

Janie's face changed in an instant. The smile vanished and she looked like she wanted to hide. She said "goodbye" in a tiny voice and ran across the alley to her mother. "See what I got?" But her mother was already heading back indoors. "Get in here and watch TV so I won't have to come out here every five minutes to look for you." The door slammed again and Kim went home to fix supper.

After work on Friday, Kim walked quickly home, turned up the alley to the cottage and knocked on the door. Gail opened it. She wore a man's old blue robe, no shoes. A cigarette burned in one hand. Kim took a deep breath.

"Hi. I know we haven't officially met, but my name's Kim McDaniel. I've talked to Janie a few times here in the alley." The woman did not reply. Kim felt awkward and her words came too fast. She felt her face turning red.

"Anyway, Cinderella is playing downtown at the movies and I know my husband wouldn't be caught dead taking me to see it, so I wondered if you'd let me take Janie to it. I don't want to go alone, I mean, so I thought that if it was OK with you..." Kim looked up from her feet into Gail's flat green eyes. She hadn't changed expression.

"I can't afford no movies."

Kim had heard the same words from her mother many times as a child. She was ready for it. "Oh, that's OK. I'll pay for her. We'll go to the matinee on Saturday, when it's cheaper. If that's OK with you."

Janie peered around her mother's legs. There was a small bruise on her cheek and a healing cut on her chin. Kim covered her surprise with a big smile. "Hi, Janie."

"Can I go movie, Mommy?"

"I guess so," Gail said to Kim, without looking at the child. "She ain't got nothing better to do, that's for sure."

On Saturday afternoon Kim went to Jame's house to pick her up. Janie's hair was brushed, for a change. Her clothes were clean, but very old. Her sneakers had holes in them. Her two younger brothers, still in diapers, watched them go from the open doorway, wistfully sucking their thumbs.

"Do you know the story of Cinderella?" Kim asked as they munched Raisinettes and waited for the movie to begin in the darkened theatre.

"I never been in a movie."

"Oh. Well, it's a pretty story. It's a cartoon with songs in it. Can you sing songs?"

"Sometimes I sing with Mommy's radio. Cinderella's a princess, right? Can we get popcorn, too?"

"Maybe. Yes, she's a princess, at least, after she marries the prince, that is. She's got a fairy godmother, too."

"What's a fairy godmother?" The lights dimmed and the movie started before Kim could answer her.

Janie loved the movie and begged to stay to see it a second time. Kim offered her a trip to Baskin-Robbins instead.

"Can I come live with you?" Janie asked, ice cream running in strawberry streaks down her chin. Kim stopped in mid-lick. Janie wasn't looking at her, she was staring with red-laced intensity at her melting ice cream cone.

"How come you'd want to do that?" Kim finally asked.

"Cause you're nice."

"Thank you, honey. I think you're nice, too. But your mommy sure would miss you if you came to live with me."

"Huh-uh. And I could go see her sometimes, and go to my Granny's with her."

Kim cleared her throat. "Your little brothers sure need their big sister."

"What for?"

"Well, to have somebody to play with and to teach them how to be big."

"All they do is cry all the time." Janie ate her cone with methodical crunches and watched Kim's face.

"I'm sorry, Janie, but you can't live with me. My husband doesn't want any kids right now. And your mother wouldn't let you do that. You're her little girl."

Janie sighed. "OK. Will you take me to a movie again?"

"Sure. If your mom will let you, we'll do lots of things together. Sometimes when I go to the park to jog, you can go with me. Do you like to run?" They made plans while they finished their ice cream, and went home to part with a hug at Janie's door.

The next time Kim went to take Janie out, she was greeted by one of Gail's boyfriends. Smoothly apologetic with hard eyes, he said that Janie had to stay in that day for not minding her mother. Kim felt him watching her as she walked back to her gate. She didn't like that, and told Rick so.

"Forget it," he said. "After looking at Gail all day, he's probably glad to see a pretty girl like you. Well, this is fine with me. Now you can go fishing with me today." Kim changed clothes and they went fishing. Neither of them caught anything, but Kim wasn't trying to, anyway.

It was several days before Kim saw Janie again. She didn't answer when Kim asked if she had had a cold or something; she just laughed and demanded in her charmingly arrogant way that Kim take her to the puppet show at the children's museum that Janie had heard advertised on TV. Kim suddenly looked with a sense of numb sadness at the child, wondering what Janie's life would be like as she grew older. Kim began to imagine herself Janie's fairy godmother; she would encourage and help the little girl along, guide her to a love of books and beautiful things, and imbue her with a sense of ambition. Janie would go to college and pursue a career and thank Kim as mentor someday.

"Let's go somewhere," Janie pleaded, pulling at Kim's hand. So they went running in the park. And the day ended at Sear's, Kim buying Janie a new pair of sneakers. The old ones had literally fallen off Janie's feet right there in the park. Kim let her pick the pair she wanted. They were pink with little Winnie-the-Pooh's on them. When Kim took Janie home, Gail did not offer to pay for the shoes. She had been eyeing Kim with a certain sense of grudging gratitude, but never thanked her or offered to help in any way. Not that Kim minded; she barely noticed. Gail's silence was her approval, so Kim spent time and money freely on the other woman's child.

Janie's birthday came on August 19. Kim had arranged to take her out to lunch, and afterward they went to the children's shop to buy the velvet dress she had seen in June. The shop clerk gave them her warmest mother-and-daughter smile and regretfully informed them that the blue velvet dresses had all been sold.

Janie said fretfully, "I don't want a new dress, anyway. Buy me a doll instead." So Kim did--a \$15 doll with beautiful blond curls and dimpled knees. Janie insisted on carrying the package home herself.

The next evening, Kim was taking the trash out to the alley when she heard Janie screaming inside her house. There was a regular, thwacking sound accompanying her cries. Kim stood and listened; it was the first time in weeks that she had heard those sounds. She had a sudden urge to rush to the door and rescue Janie, call the Child Abuse Hotline, and watch with seething satisfaction as Gail was hauled off in the back seat of a police car. As a child, Kim received regular beatings from her mother, usually with a black leather dog collar. She used to wish that the neighbors would hear her screams and help her, but no one ever did. Kim turned and walked slowly back to her house, with Janie's screams rebuking her.

She went into her room and fell on the bed and began to cry. There were only the pillow and her tears soaking it, and the burning pain in her chest. When she was a child, Kim would go to bed at night and pray, in tears, that God would take her that night, that she would not have to wake up.

That was when she had still believed in God. When she was ten or eleven, she came to the conclusion that her mother's main objective in beating her must be to see her cry. She resolved to deny her mother that pleasure and trained herself to lie passively, with a brown loogie hugging her and her thoughts on the glory promised of Heaven while she was being whipped. No matter how good she tried to be, the beatings continued, and she grew hard against them. For some time, she didn't know exactly how long, maybe for years, Kim had found herself wondering if a suicide hears the sound of the gun when it goes off. Whenever she did something stupid, or hurt someone, or even remembered doing something stupid or mean in the past, she heard in her head a soft "bang." Sometimes two of them. Until this moment, she hadn't heard a bang all summer.

Kim fell asleep crying. When Rick came home a little while later he found her hugging her pillow, sound asleep, her face pale. He quietly closed the bedroom door and fixed dinner. When it was all cooked, the table set and the candles lit, he woke her. She sat up and squinted at the clock.

"Are you hungry?" he said.

"I have a headache. When did you get home?"

"About an hour ago. I fixed dinner. Come and eat, you'll feel better." He helped her to her feet and they walked to the kitchen holding hands.

Kim ate without tasting the food. She felt tired, groggy, sick. Suddenly she put down her fork with rice still heaped upon it.

"Rick, can we adopt her?"

"Adopt who?"

"Janie. Can we adopt Janie?"

"Oh, Kim. You can't save every abused child in the world. Besides, it'll make her strong. No, forget I said that. But we can't adopt her, the law wouldn't allow it."

"Then the law's wrong. She needs someone who'll take care of her and give her a good home. I can do that."

"Of course you could. And she could grow up to be a slut just like her mother is, anyway. Everyone knows that walking welfare automaton like in the eyes of the law. And when we're ready for kids, I want my own, not someone else's. Shit, you've spent the whole summer with her. I led her our food, spent God knows how much money on her. Every time I want to take you out, you look for something we can take that kid to. Now you want to adopt her! Give me a break." Rick got up and went to the living room. He read the paper decisively, turning the pages with angry snaps. Kim cursed at her plate and got up to wash the dishes.

The next day Kim knocked on Janie's door after work. The torn garbage bags heaped beside the porch reeked, and there were flies everywhere. After several minutes, just as Kim was about to walk away, Gail opened the door.

"Hi," said Kim, "is Janie busy?"

"How come?" Gail looked tired, as if she never slept; Kim noticed for the first time the bulge in her belly.

"I just wanted to say hello. Rick's playing in a softball game this Saturday; I thought she might like to go."

Lying on the floor of the hall behind Gail was the new doll Kim had bought, its hair matted. One leg was missing. Kim pretended she couldn't see it.

"She's taking a nap. What time Saturday?"

"Two o'clock."

"You can come get her. She'll want to go, with you. Would you want to take all three of them Saturday night so I can go out?"

Kim stared Gail straight in the eyes. "How much do you pay for babysitting?"

Gail blushed. "I can always get their Granny to do it. Just thought maybe you'd like to. She'll be ready Saturday." The door closed. Kim turned to leave, but not before a little white lace at the window was covered by a curtain.

It rained hard all day Saturday. Kim waded across the alley at two o'clock, umbrella held low, to see if Janie wanted to come over anyway. Rick had apologized, and she had, too. He had cautioned her to take a close look at her relationship with Janie. She didn't want to give up on the child, but Rick made sense in his way. But Kim was alone that day, for Rick's softball

team had a longstanding tradition that when a game was rained out, they met at a local bar to drink for a couple of hours. Kim hated bars, but Rick went anyway. Entertaining Janie would be something for her to do. She and Janie ran across the flowing alley and soggy back yard to Kim's house. They decided to bake cookies.

"Janie, what did you name your new doll?" Kim was dropping spoonfuls of oatmeal cookie dough onto baking sheets. Janie helped herself to linger-scoops of batter from the bowl.

"Tina, huh? Cute. Maybe you could bring her over with you sometime," Janie didn't answer, but picked up a spoon and started scooping dough. "Maybe I could make her a new dress," Kim continued. "I used to do that for my dolls when I was little."

"She's broke." Janie carelessly let her spoon drop to the floor, and reached into the bowl with her fingers again.

"How'd she get broken?" Kim bent to pick up the spoon so Janie couldn't see her face.

"She was mean and I had to spank her and her leg came off."

"What did she do mean?"

"She spilled her milk."

"Bring her over the next time you come. I bet I can fix her. I've fixed lots of dolls."

"You have? Really?"

"Sure. It's easy, usually. Do you get spanked for being mean?"

Janie looked at Kim coldly; she looked, with that expression, just like her mother. "Yep," she said, as if Kim had asked her if cookies are sweet.

"Does it hurt when your mommy spanks you?"

Janie nodded. "Sometimes."

"I used to get spanked, too, when I was little. Sometimes I felt like running away. Do you ever feel like that?"

"Yeah. I want to go live with my Granny sometimes. She don't spank as hard as Mommy."

"I think when you get older, you'll be smarter, somehow, for being spanked. I think maybe that's how it worked with me."

"I don't want to be smart."

"What do you want to be when you get big, Janie?"

"I don't know. A Mommy?" Janie looked at Kim strangely.

"Don't you want to go to school and be something special, like a teacher or a doctor, and then be a Mommy later?"

"What for?"

"Well, so you'll do something good with your life, and earn a good living."

Janie shrugged. "Hey, it stopped raining. Can we go to a movie?"

"We're not finished here, and I don't have enough money for a movie today." Kim suddenly felt like taking a nap. She finished baking the cookies; Janie ran back and forth from the kitchen to the living room, where 'The Flintstones' was playing on TV, far too loudly. Kim bagged some of the cookies for the children and walked Janie home. As she turned away from the door, Janie yelled, "Wait!" and ran out of the house, clutching the dirty, broken doll and its leg.

"You said you'd fix her."

Kim took the doll and held it up for a good look. It was a mess. "Yeah, I'll fix it. See ya." With each muddy step as she crossed her yard Kim heard a soft bang echoing in her head. She wished that Rick were home.

When she got inside, Kim put the doll on her dresser. It looked so forlorn and pitiful that it gave her the creeps, so she set it on a shelf in her closet and closed the door.

Brown Twig Thoughts

With a twig like this,
I'd build a tree, if I took the time.
Time was, we'd burn leaves in the autumn,
before the faceless banned
sweet-smelling pollution.
Summers, the family'd ride to
Twelve-Pole Creek, and
sometimes I'd drowse for water
with a twig like this.
Find it, too, the creek right there and all.
In the summer, when I'd run barefoot
through Ritter Park,
twigs like this crackled underfoot.

Alan P. Scott

Drema S. Redd

Mary, Mary, Mary, Mary

Johnny's our youngest. He was quite a surprise for his Mother and me. As a matter of fact, Mary thought she was dying. Of course, Mary always thought she was dying. If her muscles ached, she had multiple sclerosis, if her head hurt, she was having a stroke, and when she became pregnant with Johnny, it was cancer.

She was four months along before I could convince her to go to the doctor. "You might just as well resign yourself to the fact," she told me, "I have cancer and I'm going to die."

"Honey, please go to the doctor," I would plead, "Think of the children."

"Why, the children are grown," she'd snapped. "Don't you try to make me feel guilty. Do you think I'd be dying if I could help it?"

When she finally did go she said it was only because she had swollen so much that her clothes would no longer fit and she wanted to know if she was going to last long enough to make it worth buying a new outfit. She said if she wasn't going to last that long she'd just borrow something from my sister, Peg. "If I do have to borrow something of Peg's to die in, you just burn it when I'm dead," she told me. "That crazy thing would make some kind of shrine out of it."

I took her to the doctor, she was afraid to drive because of her condition. We sat in the waiting room for about an hour before they called her back to see the doctor. Mary sat smugly erect, certain of her fate, and unafraid. Every once in awhile she would pat my knee and give me a knowing smile.

When they called her name, Mary stood, bent and kissed me on the cheek, and strode out of the room like a woman who had lived right and was ready to take her place in that innumerable caravan.

I was glad to see her go. I mean, I didn't really think she was dying. She ate like a horse and people who are really sick just don't eat. As a matter of fact, I thought that was her whole problem. She was getting fat and just couldn't deal with it. Now, the doctor would be able to tell her as much, put her on some diet, and I would get a little relief from all the morbid talk. She would be disappointed, probably even threaten to get a second opinion, but soon enough it would be a dead issue. (No pun intended).

She hadn't been gone more than twenty minutes when I heard this shriek I knew belonged to Mary. My heart almost stopped. I couldn't believe it. Could it be that my Mary really was sick, dying. I didn't know what to do. Momentarily, a nurse appeared in the doorway. "Is there someone here with Mrs. Wells?" I staggered to my feet and numbly followed her to the doctor's private office.

Once inside the office I rushed to Mary's side, determined to be her strength. She sat in a chair across from the doctor's desk. Her face was in her hands and she was crying uncontrollably. I put my arms around her in an attempt to comfort her. She would not be comforted. I looked helplessly at the doctor, standing behind his desk, who looked helplessly back at me.

"She's going to have a baby," he said solemnly.

"It's going to be a mongaloid idiot," screamed Mary.

"Mr. Wells," the doctor pleaded, "there is absolutely no evidence to support that."

"What have I done to deserve this," cried Mary. "What have I done?"

"Well," I said, much relieved. "If you don't know, I'm not going to tell you."

"You go to hell you sonofabitch," she said. "It's all your fault, anyway. I hate sex."

I think Mary surprised herself as much as she did the doctor and me, with her retort, because she immediately regained her composure, picked up her purse and marched out of the doctor's office.

I looked apologetically toward the doctor and he said, "We'll see her again in two weeks," dismissing me.

Five months later Mary gave birth to a perfect nine pound three ounce baby boy. She named him after her brother, John, who died in the war. She's certain our Johnny will do the same.

The Archaeopteryx

I am a frog, or a bird, and my throat
swells with song. I cruise
through clouds of mud, where
flocks of yellow eels
bite the tails of trout,
bruising nonexistent heels
as of old, and when the doors of winter
are opened in the sky,
I shall sink down through soft brown ooze
to kneel upon bedrock until
foreign cold is gone, and emerge
to weave my fine yellow tapestries of slime
so I will not fade
like the Archaeopteryx.

Alan P. Scott

My Luggage

My luggage sits accusing me
from the back of my closet
as I stay-at-home.
The world's so big
but my luggage wants to
take it on anyway.

Alan P. Scott

Autumn

Willows fade into the
yellow sky as winter oozes
from under my refrigerator door.
Brown leaves cut my chest,
slicing my mouth and ears
like a lover's kiss, cold
as the foam my mother brushed
from the muzzle of my old dog Blue.

Alan P. Scott

Red

"Sqwaeeek!"

"Hit him again, Fischer," Morgan said, peering into the pen through the darkness.

Slap! The broken piece of fence post came down on the mud-covered hog.

"Sqwaeeek, mmph, sqweek!" The boards of the pen banged together as the hog smashed into them sideways, trying to dodge the pain. Slap! Mud sloshed as the hog stumbled in circles. Slap! The hog tipped sideways and lost his footing—plop into shady water. Darker blood sprouted at the back of his skull. Slap! A last great snort of breath made sputtering noises in the mud.

Lula woke up in the black night. There wasn't any clock because she had never needed one. Red fire slipped between the cracks in a pot-bellied stove in the corner of her shack, casting a flickering light on her brown wrinkled face. She always slept naked. The skin on her arms was tight and dry to the bone but draped down across her shoulders toward her thin breasts.

"Sqwaeeek, mmph, sqweek!"

Someone messing with the pigs, she thought. Lula grabbed a white cotton dress and fumbled with a few buttons. Then she was out the door and across her small porch. She jumped off the porch into tall uncut grass and, on bare feet, ran to the back. The moon was up and she heard voices. White voices.

"Who that?" She screamed. "Ya'll leave them pigs be!"

Someone was on the hog pen leaning over it. Pig droppings mixed with stale mud touched her nostrils.

"Let's get," the man on the pen said. The second man was standing next to the pen, his back to her as he started to run. Her feet were moving her fast now. Lula tackled the first one as he was jumping to the ground. He was sidny. Her momentum carried them into the mud puddles outside the pen. She bit hard into his shoulder and tasted sweat in his shirt and skin. Her jagged fingernails searched for his eyes. "Goddamn nigger bitch," she heard him say as he rolled and put her on her back. His first punch caught her high on the forehead. Mud got in her eyes. She never saw the piece of fence post hit her, but she could taste pig blood mixed with her own at the back of her throat.

"Goddamn nigger bitch." Fischer said aloud. He looked at his bloody scratched face in the restroom mirror at the Mr. Quick gas station. The scratches crisscrossed from his narrow brown eyes to his rounded jaw bone. Where the hell did Morgan go? The mud smelled like shit. He tried to raise his left arm, but his shoulder hurt like hell. Blood seeped through the drying cracked mud. Fischer bent over to wash his face. The water ran reddish-yellow from his hands. That hog had made too big a fuss about dying. Crazy nigger. He pulled a handful of paper towels from the dispenser and buried his face in them. Well, maybe she'd finally get the hint and move. Three acres wasn't much, but was more than any nigger should own. It was late and a long walk home. Fischer took a last look at his scratch lined face and went out.

The mid-day sun made the mud's stench even stronger. Flies landed on Lula's face and crawled across her forehead. One flew away as she opened her eyes. The mud sucked at her arm as she pulled it free and laid her fingers to the pounding above her eyebrow.

"Lawd, Lawd," she moaned and sat up slowly, supporting herself with her left arm. "What I done, Lawd?" She looked through the slats of the grey worn boards that made the hog's pen. "Red?" She called. The hog lay in a lump, his snout shoved in the mud. Flies gathered behind his crusted ears. "Lawdy," Lula said softly. Tears carried mud down her face as she came to her knees in an effort to get up.

II

Lula sat in a pine rocker on the front porch of her home. The crickets played up and down in unison. Orange and yellow, the sun was lying down behind the tall cypresses of the bayou while Lula rocked her chair to the bellowing of the bullfrogs. Mosquitoes attacked in waves, but the smoke from her cob pipe held them off. She gazed down the dirt road that led up to her house, and then to the right at her field, the three acres of land cutting into the Fischer's fields, which she planted for herself. Three acres her pappy had earned through work a hundred times the land's worth.

The bandage on the side of Lula's face was almost unnecessary. It had been a month since Red had been killed. She knew who had done it, but she hadn't told anyone. It was her land.

Lula searched back down the road in the fading light. She waited patiently until she could see John's sun bleached blonde hair against the shadowed oaks. He was carrying something.

"Watcha got?" She yelled.

"Ain't much, Miss Lula, but it's the finest quality," John yelled back. As he walked closer she could see he was carrying a rabbit, grasping it by its hind legs so its ears hung down. A shotgun cradled in the crook of his right arm.

"Rabbit? I give you fifty cent for that rabbit." Lula stood in front of her rocker, hands on her bony hips.

"Fifty cents? Miss Lula, this here's the finest rabbit I've ever seen bagged in Sunflower County. It took me six days to track him down and four loads of buck shot to bring him to a stop. This here rabbit could run faster than any car and cut quicker than a razor blade. And he's going to eat better than prime rib at the Greenville Country Club. Two dollars at the least. I'm giving you a deal at that, just because we've been doing business since I was old enough to shoot, and because you're a friend of the family. Otherwise, I'd have to charge you at least twelve, and that's God's truth."

"Um, boy how you do talk," Lula said. "But who can eat a rabbit filled with shot? I ain't got nary a cent. Wait till I tell your mama you been stealing from old niggers. She whop you black and blue like I done when you was little. Don't matter how big you getting."

John laughed and handed Lula the rabbit. His face was dirty and sunburnt from chopping cotton.

Lula turned and stepped through her front door. A minute later she came out carrying a hunting knife and an old Coleman lantern. John watched as she started to skin the rabbit.

"How's your mama?" Lula asked looking up, showing the whites of her eyes.

"She's doing better since you came and saw her last week, but sometimes I still hear her crying."

"How about you?" Lula asked, slopping to hear his answer.

"I miss Pa, but I'm all right. School keeps me busy, and working on our land helps. How about that thick head of your? You remember yet who did that to you?" John reached out and gently touched the bandage around her head.

"No sir, don't remember at all, but I'm better. I can take it better and give it better than any of them. Lawd knows I can."

"God knows you don't have any sense, not telling Sheriff Baker who it was that killed your hog and beat you up to stitches," John said. "I just don't understand unless you got amnesia or something?"

The students faced the cheerleaders on the stone steps leading up to the entrance of the school. The town people, many of whom were schooled in the same red brick building, stood around the circular driveway and cheered as well. Sammy saw some of his friends standing on the steps and went to cheer with them, while Charlie had to be content with standing on the driveway close to the steps with his friends. This was his first year "off the steps", Tylerville's synonym for graduating.

The rally lasted an hour and a half. Afterwards, everyone got back in their cars and started a motorcade, creating a parade of orange and black. Charlie and Sammy picked up a few friends, so now the Bronco was full. The team got on the bus, which was the most decorated, and as it pulled out, it was followed by a line of horn-honking, orange and black faithful fans. Each car was full of excitement and enthusiasm. The car rally drove the length of Chelsea Road. They drove past the hundreds of signs on the roads, and before leaving the town limits, a last sign humorously read 'Last one out turn out the lights.'

The team's confidence and enthusiasm carried over onto the field. Tyler-ville scored twice in the first quarter, then once more in the next quarter before Tyburn scored even their first touchdown. Tylerville then paced itself through the second half and came away with a 33-13 victory. Scott Allen was on the sidelines and ready to play the next week in the playoffs. So the whole incident with Maybone was forgotten, for the time. After a brief celebration on the field, Charlie, Sammy and the whole town returned to Tylerville. Charlie drove his friends to the Par Mar for a small celebration.

"We're going all the way to the states!" cheered someone.

"This is one of the best Tylerville teams we've had in years!" yelled someone else.

"Doesn't it seem funny to be off the steps?"

"I wonder how that chump Maybone feels now," someone finally had to say.

"Who do we got next week?" "Probably Webster, they'll beat Elkin."

It seemed all the kids in town were at the Par Mar. Even the Tylerville police car was there, which in another town, probably would have ended the party. But Sam Heed, the policeman and Tylerville graduate, celebrated along with the kids.

Sammy stood close to Charlie, sucking on another blow-pop Charlie had bought him. Sammy was allowed to stay out late as long as he was with Charlie. He was the only little kid left out, and Charlie thought maybe he should be getting him home soon. Too much excitement is probably gonna tucker the little kid out. After a little more celebrating and bragging about their team, Charlie got Sammy into the Bronco. They pulled out yelling and honking.

"You coming back?" yelled Retch.

"Yea, after I drop the little guy off."

They drove along and sang to the songs on the radio for awhile.

"I'm gonna be the quarterback when I'm old enough," said Sammy, trying to get more attention from Charlie.

"You'll be the best ever!"

They passed the Elks Club, where many of the older people were celebrating. Charlie's Bronco was recognized and there were yells of supremacy for Tylerville football. Charlie honked back.

"You got a few more years to practice before you can put a Tiger uniform on."

"Will you come see me play?"

"Sure, and when you score I'll give my Cuckoo-bird whistle, here grab the wheel."

Sammy knew just what to do, he had done it before. He took hold of the steering wheel as Charlie cupped his hands and gave a short Cuckoo-bird whistle, then Charlie quickly took the steering wheel back. Sammy was laughing with his happy little laugh and Charlie smiled back.

"You know Charlie, you're my best friend," said Sammy, trying to act as serious as a little kid can act. Then he broke into a wide smile, and Charlie noticed he was starting to get that same little twinkle in his eyes that Charlie himself was told he had when he smiled. Charlie twinkled back and rubbed the little kid's hair with his hand.

Todd Maybone was drunker than usual, and the other guys in his car were not much better off.

"Those God-damned Tigers are a bunch of wimps. They lucked out. I should have took out that Allen earlier; we could have won."

The quarterback for Maybone's team, Johnson, was in the seat next to him. "Let's head out to Tylerville and check out the celebration, maybe have one of our own," slurred the quarterback.

And they were off. Tylerville is known for its dark, narrow, winding roads leading up to the residential homes of the town. It was this route Maybone took to downtown Tylerville. All in their drunken stupors, the car was silent except for the heavy metal rock of Iron Maiden on the radio. Maybone seemed to be in a rush to get to Tylerville, he took the turns last and on the straightaways he swerved back and forth on the narrow road so most of the time he was driving on the wrong side of the road. Inside the car an evil laugh arose from one of the guys in the car every time Maybone came close to hitting a tree, or took a turn fast, but other than that, no one said much.

As they got closer to downtown, Maybone came upon what was probably the trickiest curve of them all. Trying to stir up his friends a little, he pressed down on the gas pedal. No one in their right mind has ever been able to take this curve any faster than 25 m.p.h., especially at night because it was such a hard curve and it was only wide enough to accommodate one car at a time. But here came Maybone doing about 35, then he looked over at Johnson to brag a little. But the look on Johnson's face made him freeze. His mouth was tensely wide open, and his hand had dropped the bottle of beer he had been drinking to point at what must be in front of them. Maybone, slowed by the alcohol, turned just in time to see the obstacle in his path. It was a big black Bronco, with extra lights and big C.B. antennae. The Bronco was making its turn, slowly towards the right, and Maybone, on the wrong side of the road, was not yet making his turn. He was still going thirty-five when he hit the Bronco, hard and crushing, on the passenger side. The Bronco was knocked off the road down into the woods lining the bottom of the hill. Johnson's head was through the windshield and one of the guys in the back seat was up in the front seat. Maybone pulled Johnson's bloody head back in the car and then tried to start up the car again after it had stalled when it hit the Bronco. The car started up with a high pitched straining sound and a terrified Maybone looked once more to the bottom of the hill. In the darkness he saw nothing more than a crumpled mass of shining metal. Maybone turned off his headlights so not to be noticed and tried his best to calm down the guys in the car, who were yelling for help. With the loud crash of the wreck and the screaming of his teammates, he was afraid someone would call the police and he wanted to get out of there unnoticed. He sped off in the direction (unknowingly) that Sam Heed was coming. Sam, as it turned out, stopped Maybone for not having his headlights on and then had an interesting little conversation.

Charlie lay painfully in the hospital bed. He woke from what seemed to be a nightmare. His neck and chin were strapped in a brace and held up by a weight and pulley above his head. His back was in sharp pain, and he found he could not open his mouth because it was wired shut. He looked up to recognize his parents, both red-eyed with black circles underlining each eye. Their hair was uncombed and they looked tired.

Charlie's eyes, lacking the twinkle, asked many questions.

"You were in a car wreck, dear," his mother answered in a quivering voice.

"You will be all right," said his father, then added grimly, "We have no idea how it happened, but we think Todd Maybone from St. Matthews had something to do with it."

Charlie knew how it happened, and it hurt his head to think of Maybone's headlights glaring at him.

"Do you remember? You were coming back from the game and taking Sammy home..." His mother stopped here. At the mention of Sammy's name, Charlie's eyes widened, he was remembering better now; how was Sammy?

His mother turned to her husband and cried on his shoulder, obviously not for the first time. Charlie closed his eyes and drifted off again. He dreamed. He dreamed of the twinkle Sammy was developing in his eyes. He dreamed of the cuckoo-bird whistle and his arms, restrained in casts, unable to make the sound that had always made Sammy so happy. He dreamed of the senselessness that Maybone was behind again. It wasn't fair and Charlie cried softly for Sammy, he cried for his best friend. And, for the rest of his life, he cried for the simplicity of childhood and whistles.

Ricky Hulcher

Again on the Stairway

His sixty year old feet
Go down to the hallway
Once decorated by
Child art and now
Zebra striped by moonlight
Through venetian blinds.
Outside the cemented
Aisle of procession
Is still warm from
The earlier sunlight,
Spilled rice sticks
To his feet like
Sand to skin,
In a pale morning
White rose petals wilt
On paler stone like
Crows pepper dawn skies,
Bouquets of carnations slouch
In neo-classical plastic pots
As if saying, "We've done our job,"
On the kitchen table
The chiaroscuro statuettes
Stand beside left over
Hors d'oeuvres and cake crumbs,
Food for the ants,
And a half empty bottle
Of Cane'i white,
Capped and recapped
And room temperature,
Gerontic feet walk
On carpet cushioning
To a vacant room,
Its personality packed away
In black leather Samsonite
And flown to a sunny siesta,
On the bay window sill
Her lighted Princess Touch Tone,
Forsaken courtesy of AT&T

Lee Wood

StillLife on Grandma's Bedside Table

Three foil-wrapped packages
Of sinus and flu
Aids lie beside a
Bottle of aspirin with

A powdery cotton cap,
Grandpa calls it "that
01' store bought medicine,"
Two pink lipstick stained

Cigarettes (Ultra-Light) in a
Blue and white ashtray
Made in Japan, one
Still burns, too ultra-light

To do anything else,
A glass of water
From the night before,
Air bubbles cling to

Its crystal walls too
Weak to climb out,
An empty coffee cup
In a dessert bowl

Instead of a saucer,
The green plastic spoon
Stirs nothing but cold
Muddy resin and grounds,

A tan ring dried
On the handle while
It rested too long,
A pincushion photo-frame with

Pink and blue bows,
"Here's the newest grand-baby,
She was by Caesarean,"
Pink and wrinkled and

Little more than fetal,
Too weak to climb
Out on its own,
Grandma holds her head

In her hands and
Sits on the bed,
Too weak to climb
Out on her own.

Lee Wood

Back to Egypt

Because I would have had Hugh's baby, he is very conscious of my body. I don't see him often, once every two or three years since our final goodbye, but when I do, I am always aware of my breasts, my belly, my thighs. All evidence of our younger selfish passion is gone now, long ago scraped away by a man in Washington D.C. that I will never see again, but there is a persistent nudge in my spirit that Hugh and I are still connected. I don't know. I am afraid this last part must really be fancy. In any event, I saw him two days ago in the Kanawha County Courthouse and have been squeezing about on my body ever since. He was with a girl this time, a younger girl, and although at first glance she did not seem pretty, she is most assuredly firm. I look at myself naked in the mirror; waist still good but breasts not what they used to be, laden down with milk from a boy, a boy by a different man. My husband and I have a happy life. The son is live and the milk is gone but my breasts are heavier and hang low; their fiber is all broken. My thighs could use exercise.

"Mommie?"

He peeks around the door, my Kevin, and sees his mother standing in front of a big mirror with only a pair of high heeled sandals on.

"Mommie," he says.

I turn sheepishly, "Mommy just got out of the bathtub. Go downstairs and watch cartoons. I'll be down in a minute."

He pads down the stairs, humming. I put on my robe. Suddenly, the air is rent with the sounds of Fred Flintstone banging on the door of his own house-WILMA!

"Don't fool around with the knobs!" I yell at him, and soon everything is reasonably quiet.

Ever since I saw Hugh, I have wondered how he saw me. Was he glad I got away? Or did he compare mentally the new woman at his side with the one passing by him. I have wondered. When I got to the office at the end of the hall - Delinquent Accounts and Reassessments - I could see his badge reflected in the glass of the door. He had turned around. He was looking at me. I looked at me too, seeing a woman who was probably a housewife in a calf-length skirt and matching blouse, short brown hair, and eyebrows that could use plucking. I paid my debt and left, for the rest of the day feeling sick and dissatisfied.

My stomach grumbles and I poke at it defensively, annoyed with this gentle swell of flesh soon to be a mid-riff, remembering too the diet I vowed on my way out of the courthouse. It is impossible. It is also foolish, I decide, to starve myself for someone I will never see again.

Kevin is sitting in front of the television in his beanbag chair. He is much too close. I grab the loops on the backside and pull him toward the window. He doesn't seem to notice. His eyes are glued to the screen. Fred and Wilma have been replaced by Tom and Jerry.

"What do you want to eat?" I ask him.

He doesn't hear me.

"What do you want for supper?" I say again. About that time a local commercial advertising a collection of country and western hits comes on. All your favorite artists for a low price. Kevin looks at me.

"I'm hungry," he says.

Neither my son nor my husband are complicated eaters; they both just like to be fed. When my husband is away, I fix simple dinners. Tonight I add cheese whiz to lat macaroni swelled out like conch shells, broil hot dogs in the oven, open a can of white onions and tender green peas. Kevin is a bread eater; he would fill up on it if he could. When he was smaller we used to call him Tommy Tucker but we don't now because, as he got older,

the name made him cry.

"Your daddy will be calling tonight at 7:30." I tell him, knocking off a blob of macaroni onto my plate. "What are you going to tell him?"

"I dunno."

"Aren't you going to tell him you love him?" I pry, "Aren't you going to tell him to come home soon?"

"I guess so," he says, shoving the macaroni. When he thinks I'm not looking, he takes a bite of bread.

John calls at seven-thirty-two days, five hours, seventeen minutes after I have seen Hugh. Eastern Standard Time. Two days in which I have not thought of Hugh consciously, but subconsciously all the time, two days in which I have spent in front of mirrors, thinking about joining an exercise class, making an appointment to have my short brown hair cut even shorter, asking another friend who I met when I knew Hugh to make it blonde again. I am wondering if I want to be someone else. I am wondering if that someone else was me all the time.

John and I talk for twenty minutes, and then I tell him what I toyed with telling him, what I had decided not to tell him after all, "You're never going to believe who I saw down at the courthouse."

"Who?" he asks, but doesn't sound too interested. He is more interested in having our back taxes paid. Our names, for a small amount, have been in the paper twice. "Well?"

"You're never going to believe this. It was the funniest feeling. Hugh Rader." I finally tell him, and there is a silence in which I don't know what he is thinking because I don't know what he thinks about Hugh. John has believed I've always loved him. I continue, "I was just walking down the hall to delinquent taxes, and I was staring at this girl coming toward me, casually, you know, just thinking that she wasn't too pretty, when I noticed the man beside her. He had on a uniform and was wearing sunglasses, you know those kind that won't let you see inside. Anyway, I was thinking, you know, that sort of looks like Hugh and then I saw his identification. It was County Government day or something, loads of schoolchildren out in the parking lot, and he had an oversized nametag right above his badge. Can you believe it? It was **him.**"

John doesn't answer. I am tempted.

"Are you jealous?" I ask him finally, "Have I upset you?"

"Oh, a little. I'm not going to let it bother me though."

I feel elated and disappointed. I don't know if I wanted him to forbid me, his woman, to ever go to the courthouse alone again, or what. Am I glad he acted sophisticated, responded in his gentlemanly fashion? There is no cause, of course, for alarm. He knows I am way past Hugh. We are both way past Hugh. But this is just what I think he is thinking. His lone tells me none of these things.

I tell him I love him. He tells me he loves me. We hang up and I know he will call again on Friday.

I don't put Kevin to bed because I don't want to be by myself. I let him fall asleep on the opposite end of the couch while I watch television. Later, when he is deeply under, I cradle him in my arms just like he was a little baby again. It was a rough pregnancy. Sick all the time. Nausea. Sharp pains in the lower abdomen. I hurt so bad one night I dreamed the first baby was put back inside me. I look at Kevin's face in the glare of the screen. Blonde hair, blue eyes, wide nose just like his father's. No chance.

For the last four days, I have thought of nothing but Hugh. The house is full of the presence of John, his albums, his favorite chair, his pictures, but Hugh is stronger. I don't know why but I tell myself it is just because

of the baby, thinking about what might have been. Even if I were in the past to do over again, if only I had to do over again, I would not get involved with him. I would not give, no, I would not allow him to steal those years of my life. I would be wiser and stronger. I would not let it happen again. I kept him alive with a terrible pressure-I have to laugh, reminding myself of one of those native women who dance around funeral pyres. No distance seemed to matter, just the thought of him, somewhere out there, was enough to make me hysterically glad.

In an effort to organize my life, I became a schoolteacher. I taught grammar to seventh and ninth graders. On Fridays I read Dickens aloud. I developed a practical fairness, a great deal of verve, (the students and those teachers too who didn't like me said I had nervous energy); I did not allow the chaos to spill onto the outside. My adjectives were sparing, I wouldn't allow fragments, and my subjects and verbs agreed.

But there was no clean ending with Hugh. No real goodbye. Just hurried nights and casual meetings; he was always just dropping in. And running out. Once he wrote me a couple of heavy letters from Florida hinting at things that made me happy... I am almost ashamed to tell you how happy those letters made me. And by that time, I was no starry-eyed girl. And he had done me wrong before.

In the end, he was gone too long. John found me-when I wasn't looking. I was just sort of out there, you know, somewhere between shock and limbo. Which just goes to prove something someone told me a long time ago; a man looks for a woman he can love, a woman looks for a man who will love her.

Sure, Hugh came back during this 'reconstructive' period, 350 miles out of his way, but he acted like he just wanted to hang around. I suspected he came either to take me or leave me but he would never say and I was too shy to ask. Now that is one thing I really would do over, one thing that would have been in my power. I should have said, I would have said, "What are you doing here?" and he would have given me his answer. But I never ask him. Instead, I watched him work odd jobs in an area that held no opportunity and we would meet casually on the street or on campus (I was taking a class, he had changed majors again) or in a bar. Once I remember he worked in a bar. He was a heavy. He gave me a drink. I didn't say thanks; I said, "You ought to get a phone." "Why?" he asked. "So you can call me," I told him. Six months later he got a phone, called my apartment, (I had moved and he didn't know it, I had a dog he had never met, and a ring from John that fit me like a glove) "I have a phone," he told me, but at the time I didn't catch it. I had forgotten the meaning. He took those kind of chances.

In the meantime I began to love John. In the night, we held each other tightly. No, that is not true. He would casually drape an arm or a leg across me, but the minute he turned toward the window I would cling to his back. This annoyed John. He didn't like clutching. He wanted to give me a muscle relaxer; he was in pharmaceutical sales. I said no, but later, when he was called out of town, I could have used a little valium. Five or ten milligrams perhaps. Not quite in limbo but knowing the feeling. Here I was, stuck in a city with a man who avoided me and who I equally dreaded seeing while the heartbeat of my life carved out a future for me, for us, seventy miles away.

It is Friday and John calls right on the dot.

"Don't expect me to phone Tuesday," he tells me, "I'll be home by then."

"Fantastic!" I say, "But I didn't expect you so soon."

We go on with our conversation. He tells me what the weather is like in Pittsburgh, I tell him about the weights I ordered from Sears (I opted for a set of executive dumbbells, six pounds apiece, instead of the exercise class), the funny way the car has been sounding, but all the while my mind is racing on to other things. My lavender jumpsuit, a new haircut, and a tan. I want to be tanned and glowing, or at least healthy and ruddy. By the time he sees me.

"Honey," he says, knowing I'm not listening, "Where are you?"

"Lumping ahead to next Tuesday. I'll see you then."

"We'll go out to eat."

"Fiesta **Caso**?"

"Fiesta **Caso** would be fine. By the way, what you said reminded me-

"What did I say?"

"You know, about jumping. How goes the swimming lessons?"

"He still won't jump," I reply, referring to our cowardly son who is the last in the class to take the dive. "But I'm not complaining. At five, what can you expect? He just splashes a lot."

"But all those other children-"

"All those other children swim just the same."

I hang up, put Kevin to bed early, and go to sleep myself soon thereafter. I want to be up early. I want to work out with my weights before I go to the pool.

I don't make a habit of lying out in the sun. I don't think you should when you're just past thirty, but today and Monday I will make an exception. Private pool, private lessons, besides, these are my friends, Nan and her daughter Kelly. Kelly is twelve and Nan was my best friend in high school. She stayed home and married a local fellow, had Kelly young, went to a two year business college. Now she's a secretary for the Board of Education. In the summer she gives swimming lessons for spending money. We see each other at her pool three times a week. In the winter, not as often.

As soon as the children are dismissed, I take off my tunic and slip in the water. Kelly splashes with Kevin in the shallow end. I float on a raft in the deep. Soon Nan comes out, relaxed, in a skimpy bikini. She maneuvers her raft next to mine.

"Kevin's not swimming," I begin, defensive with my husband, I decide to play devil's advocate with my friend.

"Don't worry about it," Nan says, "Just give him time."

I hear a shriek, a splash, followed by a gurgle. Kelly is playing a game.

"At least he's not afraid," Nan tells me, "That's the most important thing, I think, that he's not afraid."

"Yeah, you're right. You're absolutely right."

In the few minutes we are silent, I float in a half circle. I think of Hugh and flop from my back onto my belly. I push the hair from my eyes and wonder how much to say.

"Nan," I finally tell her. "Something funny happened to me the other day."

"Oh really?"

"It's nothing. I don't even know why I should mention it but-" I take a deep breath. "I saw an old boyfriend."

Nan paddles over to the side of the pool and picks up a tube of tanning oil. She turns it up and squeezes, a few drops followed by a whoosh of air come out.

"Damn. I don't believe it. I just bought this stuff. Those kids smear it on and they don't even know what they're doing." She squeezes it again and flings it; the tube sails over the concrete and lands in the grass. "That was expensive. It had paba." She trails her finger in the water, sighs, and she is back to being Nan again. "I guess it's my fault. Jim's always telling me not to leave my stuff lying around." She cups her hands and wets her body. "You saw an old boyfriend?"

"Yeah, by accident," I give a laugh and now I am splashing in the water. I fill up my navel, leave wet trails down my calves and thighs. "Hugh. Hugh Rader. I thought all that was over but I got a rush of feelings instead."

I glance over at Nan but I can't tell what she's thinking. Her head rests on the pillow and I don't know if she's frowning or squinting up at the sun. I study her, my friend since childhood, she's wearing a black string bikini and her body is practically bare to me. We can talk about things too, and have discussed everything from our adolescent fears to our husbands' salaries, but suddenly I realize I don't know anything. I paddle closer, intending to be indiscreet.

"Nan?" I say softly.

She jumps. "Sorry. I was almost asleep." She pushes her sunglasses down her forehead and looks at me. "Something the matter?"

"No. I was just thinking about Hugh."

"Who?"

"The old boyfriend." I don't mean to but I snap. I am running out of innocuous things to say. If I were with one of my college girlfriends, it would be easy to talk about old lovers but I am with Nan and I don't know how

far I can go. "Have you ever felt anything like that?"

"Like what?"

"Like you'd like to turn back the clock and let the same thing happen all over again—even though you know it's going to turn out wrong."

"I don't know," she says, shrugging. "I don't remember the last time I saw an old boyfriend. Let me think." The raft drifts against the side of the pool and makes a squishing sound. "Once I ran into Rick Dingess down at the dairy bar. Remember Rick from high school? Let's see, I had been married to Jim two years then. I guess it was a shock. I remember blushing but I don't think I ever..." She looks over and smiles at me. "Jim got so mad he couldn't stand it. What did John think when you told him about Hugh."

"Not much. It didn't matter."

"Oh." She looks away. I think she is embarrassed for me. I close my eyes and suddenly I am in a room with very little lighting. The shades are down; it is a rainy Sunday afternoon. Hugh lies next to me on the bed, breathing, and I am curled at his side. We had made love once and it was a failure; nothing tragic or flawed, just the sort of thing you don't talk about. I knew it was over, not just that day, but everything. Still, I wasn't ready to leave him and I think he wanted me there too. Carly Simon was on the radio, droning intensely, and I sat up and snapped her off. Hugh raised his eyebrows but said nothing. He lit a cigarette and began to blow smoke rings. A fat one floated over my head and drifted outwards. I tilted my leg and caught it with my toe.

"What do you want from me?" he asked abruptly.

"Nothing," I said, bringing my feet together, "not a damn thing."

I give an audible sigh.

"Rachel?" Nan's voice is close beside me. "Have I hurt your feelings? Are you upset?"

I open my eyes against the sun and see dots before my eyes.

"Upset? How could you be upset?"

"I don't know. You were so quiet. I thought it was something I said."

"No," I lied bravely, wondering how much she heard in that sigh. "I was just thinking. It's after three and I still have to go to the store."

"Yeah, me too. I have to get some plastic liners. You'll never guess what I decided."

"What?"

"You know those vegetables Jim's step-dad always brings us? This year I've decided to freeze instead of can."

Kevin is almost asleep standing; playing in the water always wears him out. I take off his clothes and he falls into bed. I cover him with a sheet. I am heading downstairs, my arms full of wet things, when I suddenly realize how tired I am. I dump the clothes in the hall and walk to my bedroom. Late afternoon sun slants through the windows and I pull the shades. I lie on the bed and let the wetness of my suit ooze between my skin and the bedspread. I get up and take it off but because I am too lazy to walk to the bathroom, I dry the damp spots of my body with the palms of my hands. I lie back down and plump my pillow. I toss and turn but I can't keep my thoughts out. The last time we were together was on that Sunday. The room was scattered with light; it rained off and on all afternoon. Other things too, seemed negotiable. I dreamt but I don't remember what I was dreaming; I just remember waking to slow circular motions on my skin. It was Hugh. His hands were busy. One was above my head, slaying my wrists while the other strayed over my body. I trembled. He took them both away. I felt robbed and started to say so, but instead I turned to the wall. I was pouting, slicking out my lip. My heart was beating fast. The bed sagged with his weight, over and over he rolled. He closed his arms about me from behind and I tried to struggle, throw him off, I just ended up on my back. He shifted to lay across me. The pulse in his stomach was beating very hard, I whispered, "Oh no," but it was a token. My last protest brought all the barriers down. I don't know why the magic chose that moment to happen; it hadn't happened before and it didn't happen again. His hands were everywhere, rubbing, probing, but he wanted other things too. I sensed

a permanency in his lovemaking that hadn't been there before. He loved me like forever. And how did I respond? I wrapped my arms about him like a child and begged him never to leave me, never to die. I don't know if he heard me. Somewhere in the middle of this it started to rain. Fat drops sprinkled the roof, the wind banged the blind out. I stopped for a moment to listen and he began kissing, turning me over with his tongue on my skin. Was this a game we were playing? I didn't know so I rolled over, feigning escape, but he caught me by my knees and took me instead. Now I know there is a difference between love and knowledge. After that day my feelings for Hugh didn't change but my perceptions did. After all, we are just women and men. And I was a free woman, traveling fast to places I had never been. I was laughing. The rain was pouring down, pounding on the roof, the windows, interfering with the sounds coming out of my throat. The room was humid. My lips burned with sweat. The salt entered my mouth and spread like fire. I stiffened, crying out. I looked up to ask him what was the matter, but he was laughing at me. He traced a linger around my nipple. I shook my head. If I gave in, if I surrendered, I would come back to him again and again for this moment, for moments like these. I would be bonded and not free. My pride rose and fell with my breast. I let go. I quit pretending. I came clean.

This is all too real to me. I should have known I can remember this day anytime I want. I walk to the mirror and eye myself. My face all the way down to my throat is flushed. The bed behind me is rumpled; the shade is down. I touch lightly inside myself and jump, startled at the extent of my solo passion. So this is how it is. I rub the wetness into my stomach, it leaves a streak, and travel up to cup a breast in each hand. I weigh them pensively. If my husband were here, I wonder, would he make love to me? Would Hugh?

"Don't you have one for Daddy?"

John stands in the doorway, having loudly kissed his son on both his chubby cheeks. Kevin reciprocates and then slides down his leg. John heads for me.

"Hi. How are you?"

I approach him too and we meet lightly on the lips.

"Fine," I say.

It is always like this for me with us. I have a tendency to warm up slowly. His actual presence, after being gone for weeks and weeks, is a little overwhelming, chafing too. Like it or not, I have already wondered when he will be gone again. I go to the bedroom to get ready for dinner. I want to be alone and he knows this. We are going to Fiesta Caso as planned; the sitter will be here in two hours.

I go to the bath and draw my water. I step out of my clothes and later, into my jumpsuit. The lavender makes my tan look darker, my eyes brighter. I brush my new haircut away from my face. I look bold and striking. I dab Pavlova on my wrists, behind my ears, at the base of my throat; a light delicate scent.

"You look great," says John, coming into the bedroom, stopping. "What have you done to yourself?"

We drive to the restaurant in silence, John sometimes taking his eyes off the road to smother me with a deep curious stare. I pretend not to notice but occasionally I reach out and squeeze his hand. It is too early for a really romantic dinner and we get caught in some late traffic. John puts on the climate control. As usual, he sets it too high and I have to curl up against him.

Fiesta Caso is my favorite place. An elegant little Mexican restaurant that smells of hot spices and ripe fruit; it has hanging baskets of wild green vines and a large polished dance floor. There are fish in aquariums and fleet-footed waiters. What is not growing is moving and I like it a lot. I eat empanaditas and red snapper and live cheese cookies. John has shrimp with tomato and fried ice cream. The wine takes the chill off. I run a stockinged toe up his shin as far as I can past his kneecap. John blanches. Then he smiles at me "Do you want to dance?" I ask him, "Do you feel like dancing?" But he shakes his head and motions the waiter for the bill. On the way home I think he is too quiet until I realize this is the way he always is. John is my rock, firm and solid. When we enter the house, he reaches for the light but I slap his hand away. "Let's be silly." I tell him, and weave with him up the stairs. A couple of times he stumbles, a couple of times

he swears. "Get hold of yourself, Rachel," he says crossly, but I can't. I want to be a thousand women to him. I want him to delight and exclaim over every one. I rub up against him, arching, until finally, in a frenzy born of lust, of exasperation, he knocks me on the bed. He falls face down and begins kissing. I wrap myself around him again and again. I feel the scrape of his beard against my stomach, my thigh against his chin. "That's my girl," he says, at intervals, "That's right." And it's true, I am growing calmer. The other women leave. I think of Kevin swimming and Nan freezing and a hundred other things. I trace his mouth in the dark, he is smiling, and I reach for him. My toes point downwards. I am myself again.

He ignores my delirium.

"What is it with you?" he asks later, sleepily. "You were really, I don't know, out there for awhile."

"Fey."

"Is it a book? What are you reading?"

"Oh, good heavens, John, if you're going to blame it on something, blame those weights I've been lifting. Those dumb dumbbells."

He turns on his side and soon his is snoring. I press close against his back. I run my fingers lightly over his body until I find the pulse in his throat and rest there. His heart beats steady and I give a sigh. Yes, John is a rock and I must say I will always love him. He sees me through all my changes, my mysterious yens.

Looking back rationally, I don't think I ever loved Hugh. If he seemed a part of me, well, it was a part I could do without. Holding him was not like reality nor did he ever stay long. Maybe he couldn't. Maybe I didn't want him to. Once I remember running into a group of friends outside his apartment. I had been upstairs having it out with him - which meant we didn't really have it out at all. He would cut and cut in a hundred different places, bringing up things that didn't matter, (he never did mention the one thing that mattered) and I would take and take until I could have stabbed him with a knife. But I saw the group of friends and, oh, his window was still open. "Come with us," they urged, "We're going to Cheers for ladies' night." "Great!" I said too loudly, "I'd love to go with you to Cheers for ladies' night." But after I got home, after I showered and shaved my legs and curled my hair and he still hadn't called, I decided to go to a movie with a girl I met in history class. My friends understood but later, one of them told me, "You should have been there. Hugh came. He stayed in the back room and played pool all night." I was furious but now, seeing us both squeezed into perception, I realize it was all too much for us. Then and now. That sort of thing wouldn't do all the time.

John is never home for long, an extended weekend, five days at the most. Still, we call ourselves a family. One morning, he goes to see Kevin swim, another he takes my car to the garage. He watches me work with my weights. "Here, do it this way," he says once, getting up off the couch, coming to me. He turns my wrists in a new direction. "This will help your pees. That's what you want, isn't it?"

Late Sunday night, the night before his leaving, we lie in bed together, lit under the covers like spoons.

"I wish you could come with me," he says, out of the darkness.

"I do too, but Kevin has swimming and oh, I don't know, it's more than that. I guess I'm lazy. Fat and lazy."

"You're not fat."

"Maybe when Kevin gets settled in kindergarten this fall, I could work something out with Kelly and Nan. Or maybe I could call my mother."

"Fine. Sure." His tone is curt but he's not angry with me. As I have been talking, as the excuses have been spilling out of my mouth, his hands have been urging me closer. And I give, bound by giving, my body touched at his certain pleasure. Out on the road, I know he is faithful to me.

In the morning we are bright and determined, but there is tension in the air. Sometimes it happens that we argue right before he leaves. This one

begins over a letter in the morning mail. A letter from Mr. Frank L. Simpkins, Kanawha County. John opens the letter and tells me forthrightly that I have paid only half of last year's taxes.

"How could that be? I was right there in person. Why didn't someone say something? The lady that took my card, stamped my-"

"You can't blame someone else for your own mistakes. Why didn't you just read the chart they sent you?"

"Oh, yeah, their charts. The one they sent in the mail. Do not pay amount listed at the bottom of the page. Check transaction code. Examine right column. Come on."

"Look," he glances at his watch and lowers his voice. He doesn't have time to argue. "I'm going to go in the den and get the chart. I'm going to figure it out. Then I'll write the check. All you have to do is deliver it."

"Me?" My voice squeaks more than it should. My heart pounds. My mind splices memory like a film and I see a woman caught in a long corridor, a rushed, unadorned woman, her ex-lover eyeing her coldly forever. 'Tm not ready."

"You're what?"

"I'm not going, I mean."

John, who has forgotten all I told him, mistakes my fear for stubbornness.

"Why not you? Why do I have to do everything when I'm home? After all, you're the one who -" Suddenly he breaks off, he sees what I see. "Oh, Rachel, don't be silly. What's his name is probably flying around in a squad car somewhere."

John goes to the den. He rummages in the desk. I know he has the paper. I know he is reading the chart. I can see him writing the check. I hear him tell Kevin goodbye. He picks up his briefcase and comes toward me, check in hand.

"Here," he says. Lips pursing.

"Call me," I tug at his lapel.

The door closes and I watch him through the glass panels until he gets to the car. Then I go to the den and watch Kevin watching T.V.

"What do you want for breakfast?" I ask him.

A commercial is on and he hears me. "Peanutbutter and jelly," he says.

He throws back his head and looks up, squinting at me, at the slant of sun streaming through the picture window that sharpens his features into those of early adolescence. I jump. The sight of him, projected forward, takes me back-how long has it been-ten years?

"Peanutbutter and jelly," he reminds.

I mean to say no but I say "Okay" and in a few minutes return with a plate to the den. I draw the curtains till the room is dim.

"Kevin," I say sharply. He looks up, himself again.

I go upstairs and draw my bathwater. I dig in my closet, passing over jeans and skirts till I come to the crepe de chine. I hesitate before closing over the hanger. What does it matter, I think, what's a little overkill? If I see him it will just be to say hi, talk about now and then. I think about calling Nan but I dial the sitter. She says she can be over at ten o'clock sharp. I take a bath in scented water. I darken my eyebrows and polish my nails. I spray perfume in my heels before I step into them and listen as they click carefully down the stairs.

Kevin is still sitting in front of the television; breadcrumbs are scattered on the floor. I look at the clock on the mantel. It is a quarter past the hour and suddenly there doesn't seem to be any reason to be here anymore.

"Kevin, I'm leaving but the sitter will be here."

He doesn't answer. I walk over and tilt up his chin. "Are you listening? Did you hear what I said?"

He nods yes and I kiss him, tasting lily on my lips.

The street is deserted when I back my car out of the driveway. It is a beautiful morning, cloudless and blue. I look once more to see if my son is looking out the window but the curtains are still. Relief washes over me, so intense it borders on guilt. At most he'll be alone half an hour, I tell myself, and I have an appointment. It's not like leaving for a thousand years.

Joan H. Dew

Boy's Night Out

Gnarled trees crouch 'round the snapping fingers
Basking flushed bark in the firey warmth,
Guarding the children sleeping 'neath their outstretched arms-
Worrisome mothers and their young.
Beyond this thicket of foster parents
The sounds of night take life.
One small boy peeks through sleep crusted lashes
As giant red-eyed beasts crash through innocent foliage,
Ogres tear tender flesh from the bones of wandering babes,
And an unseen serpent slaps and slithers toward the fire's glow.
The small boy cowers deep inside his sleeping bag
And listens to the creepies of the dark.

Missy Dalton

State Hospital

He paces like a lost tourist between
concrete benches beside the patients' quarters,
he hums a tune and circles the bird bath
that reminds him of a champagne glass,
he sits beside Mary who ate cakes of Dial soap
like candy bars at last year's Christmas party.
She claps at his movement and counts
the red brocaded roses on her robe.
His raccoon eyes stare down at blue sneakers.
"Royal blue," he says to make sure
and hugs his arms with pale hands,
touches institutional pajamas
now soft cotton from washings.
He watches the iron gate
hold back the blonde wheat field.
"Comb your hair, young man," he yells across the grass.
He waits for visitors who aren't coming.
He smells cut hay and the harvest.

Lee Wood

Country Harvest

Hildie's day was in October
when oak leaves like crumpled
paper moved close to the ground.
She was eating sandy brown grain
beside the house-like sty
when her turn came.
"Come on, Hildie, come on now,"
coaxed Uncle Max with a handful.
The cold blue barrel touched
between those squinted uninterested
eyes, then pulled away.
In one swift movement another man
found her throat and warmed
his hand in the red spout.
Hildie looked surprised as
one looks when opening a gift.
Behemoth legs relaxed beneath
her pink-black weight.
She writhed in the redness and the grain.

We walked back to the house
over the frost heaves and
left her sacrificed and grinning.

Lee Wood

Under A Violet Line

Under a violet line, on a rainy bank, two men sit,
not quite animals, watching a dusk bonfire.
I'm so far off talk is only a whisper.

Their whispers hiss like the fire, die down.
They put out their whispers, nothing.
Now the only thing connecting us is my vision.

Their faces are bleached like daylight
before day is stained with night.
Their faces almost blend into dusk
except for faded movement.

They stare into turquoise flames within
golden flames, not seeing the wild gray
lines of slab stacked and crouching under
the violet line, almost an animal, an old animal,
tame with hot fur and whining to be stroked.

Powdery smoke seeps from the fire,
lavender as a watercolor near the flames,
and deepening as it washes into the violet line,
until everthing is the purple before night.

Night gets darker as the fire gets brighter.

A man, the man wearing the green plaid jacket,
reaches up and pets the sky.

Night puts out the fire.

Mary Sansom

Valediction

I miss the bony hollow in the middle
of your chest. My chin fits there
the way a teacup fits a saucer.
I miss your ribs curved like cupped hands
to hold your heart
and the crease down your back
that folds you neatly into left and right.

I miss the inside of your right wrist
slipped modestly
into your concealing, dark-faced watch
I can separate your watch
from you as deftly as some men
unfasten bras, their fingers snapping
and caressing the hooks
and the small bit of back beneath
before the bra swings free
releasing breasts bleached white.
Without the numbers
your wrist is naked.
One long turquoise vein decorates
the white bracelet of skin.
I press my thumb into blueness.
When I release that vein
the blood flows a little faster
to your heart.

Mary Sansom

Ducks

are childish poultry
petty and hollow and shallow
as pond water
stiff as wooden shoes
picturesque as rocks painted white
decorating a sidewalk.
Their souls know no salvation
but feathers and bread crumbs.
Their babies are paltry.
They litter the water.

Mary Sansom

